Naval Air Station Corpus Christi

Hangar 41

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The war in Europe had raged since 1939 and the United States anticipated that it would be embroiled in the conflict. The Navy predicted that aviation would play a critical role in the war and flight training commenced at Naval Air Station (NAS) Corpus Christi on April 1, 1941.

The first class of student aviators was composed of 52 cadets. Students completed two weeks of basic training followed by four weeks of "ground training" and nine weeks of daily classroom instruction. At the conclusion of classroom instruction, cadets began flight training in the N3N-3 Canary, a biplane trainer. The first group of aviation cadets — each completing approximately 600 hours of flight time — graduated in November 1941, just 36 days before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, an action that prompted the United States to declare war.

NAS Corpus Christi was the largest naval air training center in the world at the onset of World War II. About 300 pilots were graduating from the base each month by the end of December 1941 and this doubled in 1942. More than 30,000 cadets graduated from NAS Corpus Christi between November 1941 and March 1946.

Aerial photo of NAS Corpus Christi, 1949. (NAVFAC Archives, Port Hueneme, CA)

Seaplane District in the background and the breakwaters in the foreground. (NAS Corpus Christi, Public Affairs Office)

Seaplane Hangars/Ramps Historic District

The Seaplane Hangars/Ramps Historic District is a large L-shaped area that includes most of NAS Corpus Christi's waterfront property. The district is related to the station's primary mission as a flight training center. It was found eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A for its contribution to naval aviation training efforts from WW II to 1947. Facilities that contribute to the historic district include six hangars and 17 ramps.

The Navy constructed the seaplane ramps and breakwaters along Corpus Christi Bay and the Laguna Madre. The ramps enabled seaplanes to taxi from the hangars into the water while the breakwaters were designed to reduce wave action and create a safe take-off/landing area.

Hangar 41 nears completion, while the waterfront area is dammed to construct the ramps, 1941. (NAS Corpus Christi, Public Affairs Office)

Hangar 41 Contributes to the War Effort

Built in 1941, Hangar 41 was used for N3N-3 seaplane training. Seaplanes played a vital role in WWII, undertaking both offensive missions, including anti-submarine and land attacks, and defensive operations, patrolling the seas on the lookout for the enemy. They also played a critical role in search and rescue operations.

In 1967, owing to the development of helicopters and the new emphasis on fast carrier groups, the Navy ended seaplane training and reutilized the facilities for other training.

Training on the N3N-3

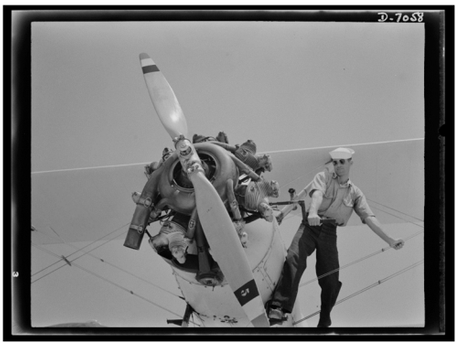
A Sailor confirms the status of the airplane with the pilot. (Library of Congress)

To be a successful cadet at NAS Corpus Christi Eldon Hill remembers, "We had to be aggressive; we had to be athletic; we had to be the type of men that just wouldn't give up. That's what the Navy was looking for." [1]

Pre-Flight

A last minute check is made by a Sailor at the Naval Air Station before the seaplane is launched. It is a two person job to get the N3N-3 started. Prior to flight, both the ground crew and pilot verify the plane is fueled and gauges are working properly.

The N3N-3 used a hand crank to start the engine. The Sailor would insert the crank and vigorously turn it until the flywheel had enough momentum and the starter T-handle was pulled by the cadet/pilot.



A Sailor at NAS Corpus Christi starts the engine in preparation for flight. (Library of Congress)

The N3N-3 is ready to head into the water. (Library of Congress)

In-Flight

During the flight, the instructor sat in the forward cockpit and the student sat aft. Communication from the instructor to the cadet in the air was done through a speaking tube, called a "Gosport," attached to the cadets' helmet. It was not a two-way tube; therefore, the student responded using hand signals. At the end of the flight, the instructor would give the student a thumbs up or down depending on how the flight went letting him know if he passed or failed. After about 10 hours of flight time, a cadet was typically ready for a check and final check operation with a chief flight instructor. If the flight resulted in a thumbs up, the cadet was ready for his first solo flight.

Skills learned in ground school instrument training proved to be very important for inflight trainings. LTJG Thomas Wiley (Ret) practiced blind flying at NAS Corpus Christi which relies on instrument flying preparing the cadet to fly when there is an inability to see the horizon either from being above the clouds or in a storm with limited view. [2] ENS Richard Wood (Ret) further explains "...we could navigate by the stars and do the dead reckoning navigation where you had to follow...the direction of the wind and how it was affecting your gear and your direction." [3]

Flying could have its challenges, but also when landing the seaplanes, "You had to be able to pick out the right part of the crash of the wave in order to keep from smacking down into the water, hitting hard," says LTJG John Evans (Ret).[4]

The N3N-3 secured on a dollie; cadet and instructor head back to the hangar. (Library of Congress)

After-Flight

Seaplane ramps enabled the seaplanes to taxi from the hangar to the water. Wood describes the process for getting the plane back on land using the ramps. "You bring your plane up to the ramp and tie it to a buoy and then they would float these [dollies], hook them on and then they could pull you up on the ramp like a regular airplane." [3]

The Seaplane Hangar/Ramp Historic District was equipped with two crane platforms. Prior to the completion of the seaplane ramps, these crane platforms served as a deck for cranes to hoist seaplane trainers out of the water and onto the apron. On the apron, the ground crew would lock the plane onto the dollie and the plane would go back to the Assembly and Repair Department to be reconditioned by civil service mechanics.

A seaplane is hoisted by a crane onto the apron. (Library of Congress)

Final Use of Hangar 41

Hangar 41, 2000. (PA2 James Dillard, USCG)

On Nov. 20, 1950, NAS Corpus Christi became home to the United States Coast Guard (USCG) Sector Corpus Christi, Texas. Hangar 41 was home to the USCG Sector for more than 67 years before they relocated to Corpus Christi International Airport in 2017. The USCG served the entire western Gulf of Mexico with one PBY-5 Catalina. Over time, the USCG replaced the PBY with the UF-1G and added helicopters and fanjets to their fleet.

The USCG's main function is to conduct 24-hour search and rescue operations. "Typical rescue missions include: searches for overdue boats, assisting disabled or sinking vessels; rescuing survivors; and medical or other evacuations from offshore oil rigs or vessels." [5]

USCG Albatross, May 1955. (USCG Photo No. 8 CGE 051655-05)

1. Delany, Norman C, et al. "The Oral History of the Naval Air Station Corpus Christi During World War II." Department of Defense Legacy Resource Management Program, 1995.
2. Wiley, Thomas Robert. Interview by Robert Stevens. Veterans History Project, 6 Nov 2019, memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.83642. Accessed 25 Oct 2021.
3. Wood, Richard Allen. Interview by Jan Ahern. Veterans History Project, 6 May 2020, memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.81785. Accessed 25 Oct 2021.
4. Evans, John Ole. Interview by Jordyn Zander. Veterans History Project, 6 Nov 2019, memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.55244/. Accessed 28 Oct 2021.
5. "1950: Coast Guard Air Detachment Corpus Christi, Texas Established." *Coast Guard Aviation History*, Coast Guard Aviation Association, cgaviationhistory.org/1950-coast-guard-air-detachment-corpus-christi-texas-established/.