A Brief Sketch of San Diego’s Military Presence: 1542-1945

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A military presence has been a major focal point of San Diego’s development since the earliest European ship sailed into the nation’s most southwesterly port. With the arrival of Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo sailing for Spain in 1542, the port—then named San Miguel—took on life as a strategic location for shelter and defense. Surveyed and mapped by Sebastián Vizcaíno in 1602, and given the permanent name of San Diego de Alcalá, the port’s virtues were once again noted. Lacking any apparent mineral wealth, the local Kumeyaay natives remained little disturbed until 1769, when Spanish military detachments arrived by sea and land. They accompanied missionaries under Father Junípero Serra for the purpose of founding Mission San Diego de Alcalá, first in Upper California.

San Diego remained sparsely occupied during the Spanish period, constructing in 1774 a Presidio—fortress with soldiers and families—on the hill overlooking San Diego Bay. They built Fort San Joaquin (Guijarros) in 1797 on today’s Ballast Point, guarding the entrance to the harbor. A very few battles took place—most against British and American smugglers—well into the Mexican period (1821-1846). The US-Mexican War brought an all-out attack by the American Pacific Squadron with troops marching south under John Fremont and those attacking from the east under Stephen Watts Kearny at the Battle of San Pasqual. The outnumbered Californios were forced to surrender on December 6, 1846. The American military, including army, navy and marines; Mormon Battalion volunteers; and multi-

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 ethnic residents of the Pueblo of San Diego, always peaceful, lived under a fairly amicable truce until the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed on February 2, 1848, giving the area to the United States. Some barracks were built and the harbor modified, but the major activities in the port included fishing, the arrival of visitors, and, with the discovery of gold near Sacramento, a stream of ships stopping for provisions on their way north to San Francisco.

The early American period—1850 to World War I—saw some token military efforts during the Civil War and a shore detail kept a constant lookout. With the arrival of Alonzo Horton in 1868, San Diego’s focus shifted from Old Town to a new development flanking today’s Broadway and referred to as Horton’s Addition or New Town. The completion of the transcontinental railroad and subsequent lines to Southern California and San Diego set off an economic boom of the 1880s soon followed by the national depression labeled as the Panic of 1893.

Although far removed on the West Coast, San Diego felt repercussions of the Cuban Revolution of 1897. The city revived some long-forgotten plans to fortify the entrance to San Diego Harbor while the monitor Monadnock guarded the harbors of San Diego and San Pedro. A torpedo placement was planned for the seaward side of Ballast Point for firing wire-controlled torpedoes and a remote-controlled system of detonated mines. In the meantime, San Diego decided to hold a mid-winter carnival on February 22, 1897, with a fancy dress ball and Rear Admiral Charles Beardsley, Retiring Commander U.S. Navy, Pacific Squadron as guest of honor along with a large portion of the Pacific Fleet.

In 1898, when war was actually declared against Spain, concerned citizens held a parade honoring the resolution and burned a Spanish flag in front of the San Diego Union office. Five hundred men volunteered to defend the city in case of attack and held a celebration when Admiral Dewey captured Manila. By 1898 Company D, Third U.S. Artillery had arrived to occupy the new fortifications on Ballast Point. Troops were moved from the San Diego Barracks to the new Army installation on Point Loma in 1903. It was named Fort Rosecrans after Civil War hero General William S. Rosecrans.

William Kettner, later Congressman Kettner, arrived in San Diego in 1907. Theodore Roosevelt sent the Great White Fleet of sixteen front-line battleships to pay a visit in 1908; Kettner became an immediate promoter of the US Navy as an economic benefit to San Diego. Soon after a Naval Quarantine Station and a Coal Station were built to serve the navy in the harbor. Plans were begun as early as 1909 to host an exposition honoring completion of the Panama Canal proposed to open in 1914. City Park—renamed Balboa Park—was the chosen site. It proceeded according to plan, but not without controversy. Considering the attendance in 1915 of both Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt, promoters of
San Diego as a prominent naval base, the fair was an economic boon to the port. Plans were interrupted slightly by the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution in 1910 with some military and civilian exchanges during the Battle of Tijuana in 1911.

When the Panama-California Exposition opened in 1915, not only was completion of the canal celebrated, the fair became a popular stopping place for those in the military and those wanting to join the service. Marine Corps Colonel Joseph H. Pendleton became an enthusiastic supporter of San Diego during the Exposition. San Diego's role became even more important with the outbreak of World War I and the founding of a Naval Training Station and Naval Hospital in Balboa Park. Tent encampments were necessary until more permanent Navy facilities could be built following the war. The US Army established Camp Kearny on the mesa north of Mission Valley in 1917. It was completed in August and occupied until 1920. The navy also secured permanent facilities on Point Loma and in Balboa Park as San Diego congressmen and city officials favored these moves. In 1922, San Diego was designated as headquarters for the Eleventh Naval District.

Franklin D. Roosevelt, long a promoter of San Diego as a naval base, became president in 1932 as the national economy reached an all-time low. By 1934, the Depression reached its full effect in San Diego, but a number of government measures encouraged recovery. Prohibition of liquor—the eighteenth amendment—was repealed in 1933 and a second exposition was planned for Balboa Park in 1935. The Navy spent $1.4 million and the Army $1.8 million on construction projects. Major Rueben H. Fleet of Consolidated Aircraft Corporation of Buffalo, New York, made a far-reaching decision when he moved his plant with 800 employees and $9 million in orders to San Diego. After examining several locations, Fleet found San Diego to have everything he needed—a good airport, a publicly-owned waterfront, an excellent harbor, a city large enough to furnish labor and materials, and a proper climate for test flying and materials. Consolidated Aircraft began operating in San Diego in October 1935.

The federal census of 1940 showed that San Diego's population was nearing 300,000. With the outbreak of World War II, the rate of San Diego's growth increased tremendously. Local aircraft plants attracted workers from other states while all military establishments were expanded and new facilities acquired. San Diego's climate was ideal for the year-round training of US Army, Navy, and Marine Corps recruits. The Navy represented more that $2.5 million in monthly payrolls and expenditures. Linda Vista, known in its early stages as Defense Housing Project No. 4002, was a $14 million project covering an area of 1,459 acres overlooking Mission Valley. Sponsored by the National Housing Authority, ground was broken on October 31, 1941, and 3,000 houses were constructed in 200 days. In May, 1,846 more units were built on large lots with paved streets and
four schools were located in the immediate vicinity. Camp Callan for US Army artillerymen occupied a five-mile stretch of land along Torrey Pines Mesa. An amphibious base was developed by the Navy on Coronado Strand along with Brown Field on Otay Mesa; Ream Field, in Imperial Beach; and Miramar Naval Air Station. The Marines acquired more than 123,000 acres of historic Rancho Santa Margarita near Oceanside to build Camp Pendleton—the world’s largest military base. The Marines also set up Camp Elliott on Kearny Mesa.

With defense precautions in San Diego dictating that thousands of street lamps be blacked out, headlights be partially covered with black hoods, camouflage installed on defense installations, and “victory gardens” planted to supplement scarce vegetables, the city stood at alert. Consumers did without new cars and new appliances while simple needs such as sugar, butter, meat, coffee and nylon stockings were rationed. Local Japanese residents were removed to internment camps and restrictions were imposed on travel. San Diego remained in a state of readiness until the end of the war in August 1945 and has continued as one of the nation’s strongest military cities until the present time. With San Diego’s population in 2014 at an all time high of over 1.3 million, dependence upon the military as its major employer will continue well into the future.
United States Government Barracks, c. 1870. ©SDHC #10547.

U.S. Army - Soldiers, 1892. ©SDHC #16473-4.

William Kettner in 1900, promoter of San Diego military as Congressman (1913-1921). ©SDHC #81:10362.
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Battleship USS Kansas, part of the Great White Fleet, 1908. ©SDHC #229.

Shoreboats land from the Great White Fleet, 1908 ©SDHC #215.
Cannon on Market Street, 1899. ©SDHC #1026.

Curtiss School of Aviation, 1911. ©SDHC #87:16425.

1st Army Flyers at North Island, 1913. ©SDHC #80:1714.
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Sailors marching in formation, Plaza de Panama, Balboa Park, 1915. ©SDHC #UT 2656.
Camp Kearny contractors with cars, ca. 1917. ©SDHC #81:9444.

Camp Kearny, Tents ca. 1918. ©SDHC #81:9646.
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Officers at Camp Kearny, 1919. ©SDHC #83:14670-1.

Official Staff Uniform, 1919. ©SDHC #83:14670-6.

Rear Admiral Roger Welles, San Diego’s first “Navy Mayor,” ca. 1921. ©SDHC #79:839.


Commerce and Industry Building (today’s Casa de Balboa), US Navy, ca. 1918. ©SDHC #81:12739.

First plane refueling in flight... 1923.
Men in top plane, left to right:
Lt. (now Colonel) Frank Reiffet
Lt. Virgil Ome.
Lower plane, left to right:
Lt. John H. Gichter, Captain
J. Dell & Smith.

Submarines, S-4 and S-9, San Diego Harbor, 1926. ©SDHC #UT8241-1174.

Naval Training Camp, Balboa Park, 1928. ©SDHC #82:13553.
Swimming, Naval Training Camp, Balboa Park, WWI. ©SDHC #86:16029.

Naval Training Camp, Swimming, Balboa Park, ca. 1928. ©SDHC #81:9194.
Marine Corps Recruit Depot designed by Balboa Park architect Bertram Goodhue under construction, ca. 1920. ©SDHC #6917.

Aerial Point Loma, ca. 1920. ©SDHC #90:18138-455.
Crew of Fokker C2 built in 1926 for the US Army Air Corps, 1928. ©SDHC #14863-1.

USS Saratoga (CV-3), ca. 1935. ©SDHC #80:2195.
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Anti-aircraft gun school, ca. 1942. ©SDHC #OP 15910-4.

Camp Callan—Abandon ship drill, 1942. ©SDHC #OP 15764.
Barrage balloon, 1942. ©SDHC #UT 8240-5.

Elementary school students collecting newspapers for the war effort, ca. 1942. ©SDHC #UT 8243-56.
Consolidated Vultee (Convair)—camouflage over buildings and material, 1943. ©SDHC #84:15213-5.

City bus during wartime San Diego, 1943. ©SDHC #86:15781.
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Ryan Flightline, ca. 1942. ©SDHC #79:SDHS-630.

Ad in The San Diego Union, September 1, 1943. ©SDHC #93:18936.
Skippy Smith with Joe Louis (center) Pacific Parachute Co., 1942. ©SDHC #9619521.

Convair B-24 Liberator Bomber. ©SDHC #6043.

USS San Diego (CL-53) entering San Diego Harbor, October 27, 1945. ©SDHC #P16028.
Note:

The above photographs from the San Diego History Center Photographic Archives will appear in the forthcoming book by Scott McGaugh and Rudy Shappee entitled *Presidio to Pacific Powerhouse: How the Military Shaped San Diego* (Arcadia Publishing). The exhibit featuring these and additional photographs covering all branches of the military will appear in the exhibit of the same name at the History Center opening April 19, 2014.