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# La Peninsula

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**Peninsula at War!**  
**San Mateo County's World War II Legacy, Part I**

## Our Vision

To discover the past and imagine the future.

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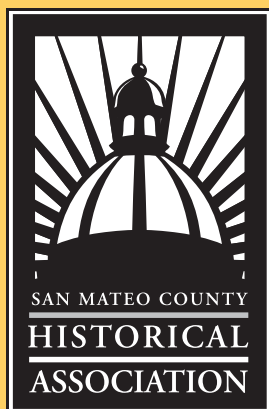
To inspire wonder and discovery of the cultural and natural history of San Mateo County.

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operates the San Mateo County History Museum and Archives at the old San Mateo County Courthouse located in Redwood City, California, and administers two county historical sites, the Sanchez Adobe in Pacifica and the Woodside Store in Woodside.



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Look for *Peninsula at War! San Mateo County's World War II Legacy, Part II* in Spring 2017. It will include articles on Japanese American internment, industries supporting the War effort and the aftermath of the War.

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**Cover:** Merchant Marine Cadets leap into the San Francisco Bay during combat training at Coyote Point, 1942.

# Armed Forces Presence in San Mateo County During World War II

by Mitchell P. Postel



Guarding Crystal Springs Dam, 1942.

## Introduction

Although actual conflict never touched San Mateo County during World War II, the San Francisco Peninsula was important to the war effort. It was a jumping-off place for the Pacific Theater of hostilities, significant training installations were present, there were two detainment camps, local industry participated in crucial ways, and a military hospital was located here.

During the early months of the War, many Peninsula citizens believed there was a threat of Japanese attack.

The December 7, 1941, strike on Pearl Harbor was devastating. All of America's big battleships in the Pacific had been severely damaged or destroyed. For any who doubted the necessity for vigilance on the Coastsides, in March 1942 a surface gun battle between a Japanese submarine and a Standard Oil tanker, just south and east of the Farallon Islands near Half Moon Bay, was sobering.

Actually, there was an immediate response on the Peninsula. The day after the bombing at Pearl Harbor, armed military sentries appeared at San Francisco Airport, on the Crystal Springs Dam and at South San Francisco's Western Pipe & Steel shipbuilding plant. Not long after this, the United States Coast Guard instituted a Beach Patrol on the Coastsides, with stations in the old McCloskey home ("the Castle") in Pacifica and in Half Moon Bay at the Wave Crest Inn (now Cameron's).

Just four days after Pearl Harbor, the federal government designated the San Francisco Bay Area as crucial for military operations which sprung resources for vastly improving the overall defense preparations in the region.<sup>1</sup> In a matter of months new installations were either built or in progress, augmenting an already formidable network of logistical, surveillance and weaponry systems.

By tracing a sort of horseshoe from south to north on the Coastsides, around San Francisco and then north to south on the Baysides, the aim of this article is to describe these principal systems in San Mateo County during the War. We can start with El Granada.

### El Granada

Here the 56<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery of the U.S. Army maintained four 155mm mobile guns.<sup>2</sup> These *Canon de 155 Grande Puissance Filloux* were of French design and had been adopted by the United States during World War I. Their shells were a bit larger than the ones used for the six-inch guns of a light cruiser warship of World War II. With a barrel length of 20 feet, these guns had the capacity to fire a 95 pound shell 12.12 miles. Known in the American military as the M1917, the weapons weighed 28,665 pounds each.

### Half Moon Bay Airport

Northwest of El Granada the most enduring wartime installation on the Coast was Half Moon Bay Airport. Official records tell us that the California State Highway Department bought the 217.68 acres by sale or by condemnation from 11 landowners just after the War began.<sup>3</sup> *Rancho Corral de Tierra* resident Ed Lea remembers it a little differently. According to him the Army simply told the farmers west of the Highway to “get off.”<sup>4</sup> Certainly the state of emergency motivated quick action, and the construction of an airfield, which was closer to Hawaii and the Pacific Theater of War than any other in the continental United States, made this project a priority.

The construction was accomplished by the Highway Department for \$3 million. The project resulted in the creation of a single 5,200-foot, asphalt paved runway.<sup>5</sup> After the Army acquired the airfield it added an operations building, shops and barracks. Altogether, 19 buildings were put up, all of them standard military types of the era. Roads and utilities were installed as well.

The airfield’s first mission was to act as a forward operating location for Hamilton Field. Taking off from Half Moon Bay, fighter planes, such as P-38s and P-40s, would intercept enemy aircraft, before they could reach inland targets.

As the months wore on, and it became apparent that



Half Moon Bay Flight Strip, March 15, 1943. Courtesy California Military Department History Program.

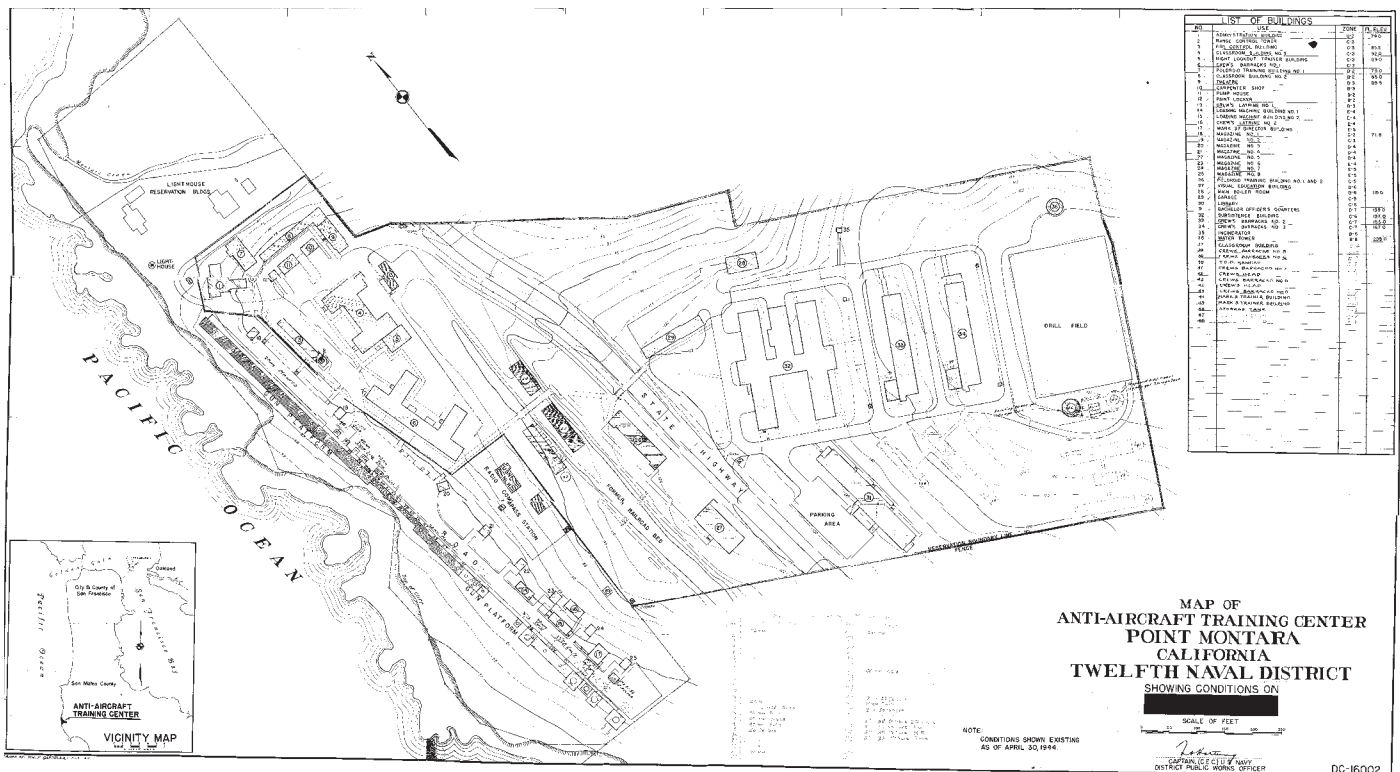
attack was not imminent, the airfield was used for patrol aircraft and as a base for planes towing targets for anti-aircraft drills. Trainer planes, flown by women aircorps personnel, pulled radio-controlled target sleeves over guns deployed at the massive Twelfth Naval District’s Anti Aircraft Training Center at Montara.

Just before the War ended, the Army leased the aircraft field to the Navy (June 1, 1945). There seems to have been little that the Navy did with the property.

On August 1, 1946, the War Department advised local authorities that the airfield was surplus. San Mateo County indicated interest in converting it into a civil airport and leased the property on February 1, 1947.

### Pillar Point

A little west of the airport, today’s military presence on the bluff at Pillar Point is an enduring legacy of World War II. The Army purchased 13.7 acres and leased another 36 at the Point in October of 1940 to create fire control stations with radar capabilities and to install



Map of Anti-Aircraft Training Center, Point Montara.

seacoast search lights.

The purpose of the fire control stations was to direct defensive artillery fire in case of a naval attack on San Francisco. The radar system was of the SCR-296 surface search type that was also employed at Wildcat Ridge at Point Reyes, Hill 640 east of Stinson Beach, Bonita Ridge at the Marin Headlands and Devil's Slide in San Mateo County. The typical equipment of such stations included a tower, a concrete transmitter house and two power plants. There were also barracks, concrete bunkers, cyclone fences and an overhead and underground electrical system. The station was known as "Pillar Point Military Reservation," part of the "Harbor Defense of San Francisco." A ten-year old study of the site revealed little left from the World War II period, except some concrete and steel pedestals, a concrete bunker and a cable vault.<sup>6</sup>

North of Pillar Point was the Twelfth Naval District's Anti-Aircraft Training Center at Montara, which included at its north end, the old Montara Lighthouse Station.<sup>7</sup>

At Moss Beach, the Center's concrete tower remains standing as a relic.

North of here there was more training facilities at MacNee Ranch at Montara Mountain, which is now a California State Park. The Army obtained this acreage for staging mock battles, allowing troops use of live ammunition. Locals listened to the sounds of machine gun fire until the end of the War.



Flight Strip with Pillar Point in background. Courtesy California Military Department History Program.



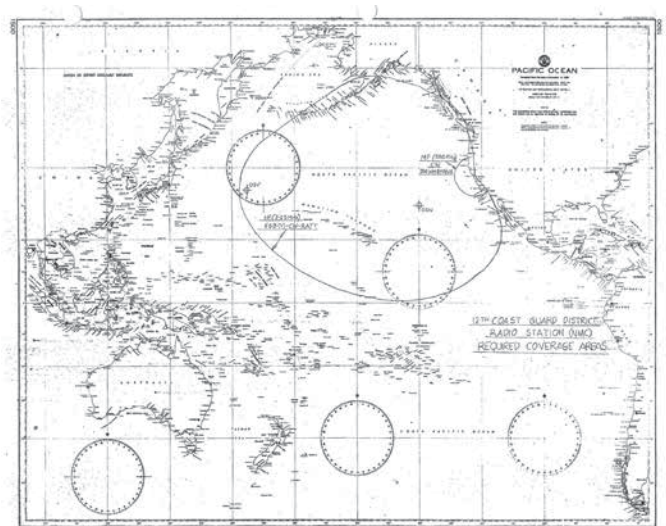


Remnants of bunker at Devil's Slide, 2009. Photo by Lawrence Lansing, via Wikimedia Commons.

### Devil's Slide

Stephen A. Haller, Park Historian for the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, recently wrote of “the dramatic fire control complex at Devil’s Slide”<sup>8</sup> that was north of the McNee Ranch, right along the coast at Highway 1. He tells us that “the land was acquired in stages beginning in 1939 by the U.S. Army for construction of Fire Control stations assigned to the Harbor Defenses of San Francisco.” The military reservation contained three fire control stations, a transmitter building for a SCR 296 radar set and a generator room with a power plant that provided air conditioning for the facilities. While the power plant ruins can still be seen a little west of Highway 1, the fire control stations and transmitter buildings are several hundred feet up a rather steep stairway that has deteriorated to a great extent. One can easily understand why the Army selected this site for observation purposes, with its sweeping views of the Pacific Ocean.

Built between 1941 and 1944, the Devil’s Slide installations were a part of Army plans begun in 1936, when the immense Battery Davis at Fort Funston near Lake Merced in San Francisco was conceived consisting of two 16-inch guns, the largest type the



Map of 12<sup>th</sup> Coast Guard District Radio Station (NMC) Required Coverage Areas.

American military ever manufactured. Fort Funston served as the southern bastion to the Golden Gate, while Fort Cronkite, in Marin County, boasting the same armament, served as the northern sentinel. Covering an area from San Pedro Point in the south to Wildcat Ridge in the north, these huge guns of the Golden Gate had the capacity to hit back at any surface vessel then afloat.

### Sweeney Ridge

Meanwhile, to the northeast of Devil’s Slide, the United States Coast Guard received authorization on October 11, 1940, to begin planning for the acquisition of 86 acres on Sweeney Ridge (just west of the San Francisco County jail at San Bruno, in present day Pacifica), for the purpose of creating a radio station. The property was purchased from the City and County of San Francisco and the Jersey Farm Company. Construction was completed on June 23, 1943. The installation consisted of barracks, which were located at today’s Skyline College, plus three transmitter buildings and an operations building on the ridge line.<sup>9</sup> The incredible range of the station included the Aleutian and Hawaiian Islands. The Coast Guard maintained the station until 1973.<sup>10</sup>

### **Milagra Ridge**

A little north of Sweeney Ridge, just on the other side of Sharp Park Road is Milagra Ridge. Here the United States Army installed its southernmost coastal defense fortifications for protection of San Francisco Bay. While the plan to build here was adopted in 1937, it was not until 1942 that the Army acquired 330.1 acres for the building of two six-inch gun installations. Designated Battery 244, construction began in March of 1943. While it was mostly finished and turned over to the Army in 1944, #244 did not receive its 6-inch guns until 1948, long after the War concluded. Its rifled guns were encased within cast-steel shields, making them resemble a warship's turrets. They were emplaced on either side of underground works that included magazines, a power plant, plotting room and crew quarters. The guns were removed in 1950, and Battery #244 became the last artillery position around the San Francisco Bay to be disarmed.<sup>11</sup>

By 1944, Battery #244 also included a battery commander's station plus fire control stations which had responsibility for taking optical sightings on targets far out to sea. Additionally in 1944, radar towers and an operating room were installed to assist Battery Wallace at Fort Barry in Marin County.<sup>12</sup>

### **San Francisco and Daly City**

San Francisco, of course, had Fort Funston and its two 16-inch guns. By war's end, 481 naval mines had been placed around the Golden Gate. The Army's Presidio, Crissy Field and Fort Mason were very active as were the piers along the embarcadero and the shipyard at Hunters Point.

Back in San Mateo County, now on the Bayside, the Cow Palace at Daly City became a motor pool and barracks.<sup>13</sup> Shipbuilding sites at South San Francisco went back into action as they had in World War I. After it had served as an "assembly center" for Japanese American internees, Tanforan was taken over by the Navy.

### **San Francisco Airport**

On the northeast end of San Francisco Airport (not yet called San Francisco International Airport), the Coast Guard had obtained 205 acres (most of it underwater) from the City and County of San Francisco to establish a \$927,000 air station. In October 1940, the Coast Guard moved into the base, after a channel was dredged to the site and a hangar, shops, barracks, a seaplane ramp, a wharf and other improvements were finished. The first commanding officer, Lieutenant George H. Bowerman, had two flying boats and 60 men assigned to him. The base was formally dedicated on February 15, 1941.<sup>14</sup>

During the War, the activities of this station were impressive. Under the command of the Twelfth Naval District Aeronautical Organization, the PBY flying boats from here had responsibility for air-sea rescue work from Crescent City to the north to Santa Maria to the south, and midway from the coast to the Hawaiian Islands. The station's crews responded to 67 ditchings and saved 103 of the 217 airmen involved. These PBYs accumulated 9,339 airborne hours, flying over 4,727,032 square miles during the War.

After the War began, the federal government took control of the Airport itself. Its role was threefold:

1. to serve as a base for patrol planes;
2. to provide facilities for flight training of pilots and crews for combat assignments;
3. to operate the Airport for the commercial airlines who had taken on substantial war related duties.

Airport insiders also remember that a pig farm on the west side of the Bayshore Highway became a secret munitions dump.<sup>15</sup>

Of all the work accomplished at the Airport for the war effort, nothing could have been more important than the third role, having the airport function as itself in support of commercial aviation. During the first few months of the War, the federal government confiscated many airline planes for the military. The craft that were left had tremendous responsibilities. Domestic air



Bunkers (u-shaped) were installed on the airfield to protect planes from strafing attacks, c. 1943. Collection of SFO Museum.



A Douglas DC-3 at the San Francisco Airport next to a bunker, c. 1942. Collection of SFO Museum, Gift of Charles C. Loomis.

transportation for military personnel, civilian defense authorities, and the general public was a necessity. The airlines ripped out the sleeping compartments in their two-engine DC-3s and installed more seats. Military and official travelers were given priority over other unlucky travelers.

Daily flight time per plane was dramatically increased. United Airlines was the principal airline at San Francisco Airport by this time. Its per day utilization jumped from 9.3 hours before the War to 11.4 by 1943. Working with fewer planes, all the airlines transported many more passengers than they ever had before.

The airlines were also given responsibility for flying transport routes, and with San Francisco being the closest major airport in the continental United States to the Pacific Theater, a great amount of activity was focused here. For this crucial service the Army Air Corps actually assigned back planes it had previously commandeered.

United's longest "milk run" consisted of the 2,818-mile route from New York's La Guardia Field to San Francisco. United also had a "south loop" extending 1,358 miles to southern California and Arizona from San

Francisco and a 1,712-mile "north loop" linking military bases in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and Utah with San Francisco.

Not long after the airlines showed their value at this work, the military called on them for more challenging duties. The armed forces desperately needed supplies for the Pacific War. Pan American and others had pioneered various routes and again, from San Francisco, lines of supply were established. It involved flying from San Francisco to constantly changing destinations as Allied forces moved up from Australia, hopping from one island chain to another in order to strangle the Japanese Empire.

United crews had to fly Consolidated C-87s, a transport conversion of the four engine Liberator bomber. Wartime conditions were such that these C-87s could not be made available for training. Crews had to be instructed largely on the ground in such crucial matters as celestial navigation, "dead reckoning" flying, radio code work, meteorology, and procedures for ditching a plane. The new crop of "90-day wonder navigators" were former ticket agents, clerks, accountants, and students. A total of six C-87s were on



hand at San Francisco Airport by late September, 1942.

The C-87s plagued United crews. Sometimes the problems were minor, but occasionally a plane would be lost. It is understandable that they were most grateful on July 15, 1943, when the Army delivered the first C-54 to the United base at San Francisco. This four-engine plane, known in its civilian passenger configuration as the DC-4, would greatly assist the cause of commercial aviation later on. Many pilots received their first opportunity to fly the craft from San Francisco, supporting military efforts in the Pacific.

By the end of the War, United alone had flown over 7,000 westbound missions from San Francisco, supplying allied forces from Australia to Guam. The effect on the Airport from these war-related operations was a tremendous upsurge in overall activities. The first seven months of the War showed a dramatic increase in aircraft movements. A record-setting 112,641 takeoffs and landings were recorded for fiscal 1942. Improvement of facilities occurred as well, with \$1,141,955 being spent on construction through that fiscal year.

During the War an assortment of major carriers made long term commitments for operations at San Francisco. On October 1, 1942, Transcontinental and Western Air Inc. signed a 20-year lease in relation to creation of hangar facilities. On May 15, 1944, Western Air Lines established service between San Francisco and Los Angeles. Before the end of that year Western was flying six flights a day on that route, hauling more than 100 passengers every 24 hours. Of all the new deals worked out with the carriers, perhaps none was more complicated than that relating to Pan American.

The City of San Francisco had had great hopes that Treasure Island, created for the 1939 World's Fair, would become a seaplane base for Pan American and bring it trade with the Orient. However the Navy had appropriated the man-made island in its preparations for war.

Officials in City Hall sent Airport Director Mike Doolin to the nation's capital in order to protect

San Francisco's interests. He called on old World War I aviation friends in high places and eventually had a favorable compromise worked out. Federal representatives agreed to expend \$10,000,000 to further upgrade San Francisco Airport. At the end of the war the Airport and all its new improvements would become city property. In exchange, San Francisco deeded over its title to Treasure Island.

With this deal made, Pan American found itself without a base for its seaplane operations. By the spring of 1944 it became known that Pan American would establish a base at San Francisco Airport. It began functioning in September of 1944. All of Pan American's activities during the War at San Francisco involved its seaplanes. Its facilities consisted of hangars, offices, maintenance buildings, seaplane ramps, a cafeteria, and other improvements.

By the end of the War, the Airport was a vastly improved facility. In 1940 it consisted of 1,745 acres, of which 226 acres were considered part of the flying field area while another 103 were "under construction." By 1945, the Airport was spread across nearly 3,000 acres. Of this, 675 were developed for use by the utility, 618 were undeveloped but had been reclaimed, 1,393 were still marsh, 25 were covered by roads, 21 were devoted to the Coast Guard Station, and 91 were fully improved by Pan American and the Navy. Runways totaled 16,000 feet by year's end. Runways, taxiways, and aprons were greatly enlarged, strengthened, or otherwise improved to meet the military need to accommodate the larger and heavier multi-engined aircraft. While the book value of the airport had been \$6,685,625 in fiscal 1941, by fiscal 1946 it was worth at least \$19 million. All this improvement allowed for great increases in activity. In fiscal 1940, 126,540 passengers used the utility while 178,448 pounds of air express were carried in or out. In fiscal 1945, 521,508 passengers and 3,607,670 pounds of air express were accommodated. Another dramatic example compares the number of flights; for fiscal 1942 it was 112,641, and for fiscal 1945 it moved up to 722,000.<sup>16</sup>



Loading cargo at the Port of Redwood City, October 1943. Courtesy of the Port of Redwood City

### The Port of Redwood City

The Port of Redwood City was a second Peninsula public utility that became important to supplying the war effort. In fact in December of 1941, Port Manager Leslie M. Rudy was visiting Washington to meet with representatives of Federal Loan Administration on a loan request that had been submitted in May. Because the War had just broken out, the request was changed to making funds available as an “immediate grant” of \$40,000 “for the purposes of providing workable facilities for shipment of bulk cement through Permanente’s new facilities by March 1942.”<sup>17</sup> At the time two cement companies were present at the Port, Ideal Cement (formerly Pacific Portland) and a newer producer, Permanente (which would become Kaiser Cement). The Permanente’s silo and shipping facilities were still under construction that December. The \$40,000 being sought from the federal government were to be used to help make the improvements necessary to transport the newer company’s cement to waiting ships. Cement, of course, was deemed crucial for defense projects.

At the Port Commission meeting of December 30, 1941, Manager Rudy made his recommendations for guarding the Port:

1. Maintaining 24-hour gate watchman and strict control over entrances of persons and vehicles.
2. Maintain an armed night watchman on the dock.
3. Employ flood-lights at the end of the dock to cover the land and water immediately adjacent.

Actually in effect since December 7, the Commission unanimously approved these cautionary measures.

As the months rolled by, activity at the Port increased dramatically. Before the War, handling 20 railroad cars a day was considered a big day. By the middle of the War, with as many as three ships at the wharves, it was common for Port workers to pass the materials of 68 railroad cars a day to moored vessels. Besides cement, one of the major products handled by the Port was oil drums. As the War was building toward its climax in 1944, the Navy took control of the Port and built another wharf.<sup>18</sup>



James Swett received the Congressional Medal of Honor.  
Courtesy of the United States Naval Institute.

### The Greatest Generation<sup>19</sup>

Of all the contributions made by San Mateo County to the war effort none was more important than the participation of its young people who joined the armed services. With a total population of 111,800 in 1940, some 10,000 residents of the County served in the military; of these 300 lost their lives.<sup>20</sup>

For the author of this article, the individual story that resonates the most began in 1987, while writing a piece on the history of San Mateo Junior College. In it, I quoted Cliff Pierce, the student body president in 1941. On December 8, it was his duty to address his classmates:

We held an assembly that Monday morning...I got up on stage to be one of the speakers. I forget what I said, but the main idea was to tell everybody that school would continue – to keep calm, to wait and see what would happen, to think clearly and not emotionally.

A lot of them didn't even take a deep breath; they left quick. I remember Jim Swett, kind of a skinny kid; we were on the soccer team

together. All of a sudden he just didn't show up for practice one day, and the next thing I knew he had become a Marine pilot and was heading on to the Pacific.<sup>21</sup>

Fifteen years after writing the article, I was looking through some books in our own Encore Books in the Museum basement when I came across an art book that featured World War II pilots and their warplanes.<sup>22</sup> The cover jacket was a painting depicting a Navy or Marine Corps flyer in his fighter. A caption revealed it to be a Marine named Jim Swett! I do not know why Swett's name stuck in my mind all those years, but sure enough it was the same person. This book cover painting showed our San Mateo County lad in his dark blue F4F-4 Wildcat over Guadalcanal on April 7, 1943. It was his first time in combat. He had just spotted a large formation of Japanese Aichi D3A1 dive bombers (called "Vals"<sup>23</sup> by the American military), and was about to attack. In the ensuing fight, Swett shot down three of the enemy before being hit himself by friendly anti-aircraft fire. Even with his plane damaged, he downed four more Vals. While battling an eighth, he was wounded, but was still credited with a "probable" kill. He ended up ditching his aircraft into the contested waters near Guadalcanal known as "The Slot" and was later saved. For this action he received the Congressional Medal of Honor. Remarkably, Swett was not done yet. He served three more combat tours, not leaving active service until the end of the War in 1945. He remained in the Marine Corps Reserves until 1970.<sup>24</sup>

### Mitchell P. Postel

Mitchell P. Postel has been the Executive Director/President of the San Mateo County Historical Association since 1984. He taught history at the College of San Mateo and is a frequent speaker on San Mateo County history. Postel is a member of the San Mateo County Historic Resources Advisory Board and the Secretary of the San Mateo County Visitors and Convention Bureau. He is the author of seven books on local history, including *San Mateo County: A Sesquicentennial History*.



<sup>1</sup> Joe C. Freeman, Stephen A. Haller, David M. Hansen, John Martini, Karen J. Weitze, *Historic Context for the Seacoast Fortifications of San Francisco Bay, Preservation Manual* (San Francisco, CA: National Park Service, 1999), Chapter 2.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Smookler, *San Mateo County Coast* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2005), 127.

<sup>3</sup> Tim Tyler, "CDSG St. Babs 2006, Planning Tour of the San Mateo County Coastline," *CDSG Newsletter*, November 2005, 18-19.

<sup>4</sup> Ed Lea, interview by Mitch Postel, Cabrillo Farm, August 8, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Svanevik and Shirley Burgett, *San Mateo County Chronicles* (San Mateo, CA: Privately Published, 1995), 88.

<sup>6</sup> Tyler, "CDSG," 20-21.

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Twelfth Naval District, Map of Anti-Aircraft Training Center, Point Montara, California, Conditions on June 30, 1945.

<sup>8</sup> Haller is extensively quoted in: Mitchell P. Postel, *Historic Resource Study for the Golden Gate National Recreation Area in San Mateo County* (Redwood City, CA: San Mateo County Historical Association, 2010), 316-318.

<sup>9</sup> Mitchell P. Postel, "SF 51: The Nike Missile Areas at Milagra and Sweeney Ridges," *La Peninsula* 41, no. 1 (2012): 15-16.

<sup>10</sup> Postel, *Historic*, 75-76.

<sup>11</sup> Postel, "SF 51," 6.

<sup>12</sup> Postel, *Historic*, 320.

<sup>13</sup> Alan Hynding, *From Frontier to Suburb*, (Belmont, CA: Star Publishing Company, 1982), 269.

<sup>14</sup> Mitchell P. Postel, "A History of San Francisco International Airport," unpublished manuscript in the San Mateo County Historical Association Archives, 1992, 54-55.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 60-66.

<sup>17</sup> Minute Record of Redwood City Port Commission, December 30, 1941.

<sup>18</sup> Archives Committee of the Redwood City Public Library, *Redwood City: A Hometown History* (Belmont, CA: Star Publishing Company, 2007), 149-151.

<sup>19</sup> *The Greatest Generation* is the title of Tom Brokaw's popular book of 1998 which described young Americans who grew-up during the Great Depression and then fought World War II.

<sup>20</sup> Hynding, *From*, 271.

<sup>21</sup> Mitchell P. Postel, "San Mateo County Community College District," *La Peninsula* 24, no. 2 (1987): 9.

<sup>22</sup> James H. Kitchens and Bernard C. Nalby, *Flying Aces: Aviation Art of World War II* (New York, NY: Barnes and Noble, 1999).

<sup>23</sup> These types of planes had done considerable damage to the U.S. fleet during the Pearl Harbor attack.

<sup>24</sup> Kitchens and Nalby, *Flying*, 60-61.



Sailors visiting the Tri-Cities USO in San Mateo.



Dance at the Tri-Cities USO in San Mateo.



## Bay Meadows: Supporting the Armed Forces



A



B



C



D

Bay Meadows was the only race track on the West Coast that operated during the War. Bill Kyne, the owner of Bay Meadows, received special permission to stay open by agreeing to several conditions. He agreed to close the race track parking lots so that race goers would not use cars to get to the track. He would only employ men over 45 years old unless they were exempt by the draft board. He agreed to pay 10% of salaries in war bonds. Most importantly, 92% of the profits from the race track went to support the war effort. Bay Meadows donated \$4 million to the war relief and service organizations.

**A** Bill Kyne (left) watching races with service men at the Club House Terrace.

**B** Bill Kyne serving at the USO Canteen built with funds donated by Bay Meadows.

**C** Bay Meadows donated money to build a plant to make artificial limbs for the Mare Island Naval Hospital. Patients visited Bay Meadows.

**D** Funds from Bay Meadows built a USO Dormitory in San Mateo for service men on leave.

From Herb Phipps, *Bill Kyne of Bay Meadows: The Man Who Brought Horse Racing Back to California* (Cranbury, NJ: A.S Barnes and Co, 1978), 82-101.

# San Mateo County: A Training Ground in World War II

James O. Clifford, Sr.

The day after Pearl Harbor the *Redwood City Tribune's* front page reflected confident determination, but while the newspaper swaggered with faith in American arms the truth was Americans weren't ready to wage war. San Mateo County would help turn civilians into the soldiers, sailors and flyers needed for victory.

The *Tribune* ran a two-column map of the Pacific under the headline "Pacific Picture Believed Dark One for Japan." The notations on the map predicted the U.S. fleet would "probably move to Singapore," a British bastion which quickly fell to the Japanese, and, of course, there wasn't much of an American fleet left after Pearl Harbor. The map also envisioned American bombers taking off from bases in the Philippines and Alaska and turning Japan's "paper-box cities" into infernos. Within hours the U.S. war planes at Clark Field in the Philippines were destroyed. Alaska saw bloody fighting, including the battle of Attu where American troops defeated one of the largest banzai charges of the war.

Japan's cities would burn, but only after an island-hopping campaign that took years, thousands of lives and a marshaling of the national will. Men who just months earlier were clerks and students became fighters not only against Japan's Empire but also the Nazi Third Reich. Military training installations in San Mateo County produced, or kept in fighting trim, the thousands needed for the global task. Anti-aircraft gunners trained on the coast. An aged World War I destroyer in waters off Redwood City was the bull's eye in target practice for bombers. Most importantly, Coyote Point was the site of a Merchant Marine college where hundreds of cadets were trained to become

officers on ships that were sunk by the enemy at an alarming rate. Even dogs were called up and trained for the "K-9 Corps."

## Merchant sailors – Unsung Heroes

Little is made of the merchant seamen's contribution to the war effort, to the point that the few times they are mentioned in public prints they are often referred to as "merchant marines," as if they guarded department stores. They were mariners, seamen, or sailors. During wartime, the Merchant Marine, a collective term, meant the fleet of ships that delivered troops and war materials. San Mateo County was almost unique in having a training school for Merchant Marine officers.

The United States Merchant Marine Cadet Basic Training School was located at Coyote Point, then officially called San Mateo Point by the federal government. The Maritime Commission hastily built 11 buildings among eucalyptus trees. The site was dedicated on August 29, 1942, and by November 1944 the base had 528 cadet-midshipmen enrolled.<sup>1</sup> Included on the campus were a chapel, gymnasium, barracks, classrooms, an administration building and a swimming pool.<sup>2</sup>

Staying for 90 days, cadets received preliminary training at San Mateo Point. As one instructor commented, "We don't hope to make third mates out of the cadets in 90 days, but we can make good cadets out of them in that short time."<sup>3</sup> In the pool, cadets were trained in how to get through oil blazing on the ocean surface and how to avoid ship wreckage.<sup>4</sup> In a physical aptitude test, cadets climbed a double-deck platform 30 feet above San Francisco Bay.<sup>5</sup> The life-jacket wearing cadets were taught to drop feet first



Cadets in the exercise yard at the United States Merchant Marine Cadet Basic Training School, October 1943.

from the tower into the water (see cover photo). This taught them how to break any debris floating from an abandoned ship.

Those who jumped off the tower included John Cattermole who remembers “jumping into a lot of mud at low tide.” He said the courses included “a lot about seamanship, standard rules of the road, things like that.” The cadets’ seamanship skills needed work, he conceded. “We hit the Dumbarton Bridge while learning how to row a lifeboat.”<sup>6</sup>

In addition to basic seamanship and knowledge of what was required aboard merchant ships, cadets could start on one of two specialties for officers. If the cadet was interested in deck command, he received instruction in cargo stowing and command. If he was interested in being an engineering officer, he received additional instruction in how to maintain engines and keep them going.<sup>7</sup>

Eventually, some 5,000 cadets went through basic training at Coyote Point.<sup>8</sup> Other cadets received basic training at Pass Christian, Mississippi. After finishing the first phase of training, cadets went to sea for six months for shipboard training. Unlike the other military service academies, Merchant Marine cadets were on the front lines with 142 killed at sea during the War. After their training at sea, cadets received nine months of advanced training at the United States Merchant Marine Academy at King’s Point, New York, which is still in operation.<sup>9</sup>

After the war, the land became the campus of San Mateo Junior College, which has since moved into the nearby hills and is now known as College of San Mateo.<sup>10</sup> A monument to the merchant marine school, one that features a statue of an eagle, was erected at Coyote Point.

### Legend Trained at Coyote Point

The ranks of the cadets who trained at Coyote Point included Edwin O’Hara who became a Merchant Marine legend when he was killed in the fight for the Atlantic while firing at a heavily armed German raider that was disguised as a freighter.

O’Hara was aboard the *SS Stephen Hopkins*, a Liberty Ship built in Richmond and homeported in San Francisco. In its first voyage in 1942, the lightly armed cargo ship battled two attacking enemy ships in the South Atlantic, sinking one and damaging the other before it went to the ocean bottom. A painting depicting O’Hara’s last moments is a treasured icon at the Merchant Marine Academy. It shows O’Hara loading the last shell in the stern gun of the *Hopkins* while standing near the bodies of fallen sailors.<sup>11</sup>

### Anti-Aircraft Training

Part of the training for the cadets was practice at the Twelfth Naval District’s Anti-Aircraft Training Center at Montara Point on the San Mateo County Coast. They fired guns at targets pulled by naval planes and were instructed in the proper care and use of small arms.<sup>12</sup>





Crews practicing at the Twelfth Naval District Anti-Aircraft Training Center at Montara Point. Photo courtesy of Al Schwoerer.

The cadets were a small portion of the men being trained at the site. Navy sailors took gunnery training at the center. According to the Office of Naval Operations, there were only four such training sites in the country.

There are reminders of the gunnery school. The San Mateo County History Museum has some shell casings from the site, but the most visible remnants are on Montara Water and Sanitary District land adjacent to the Montara lighthouse.

“We still have an array of anti-aircraft gun platforms on our district property plus some random bunkers and magazines,” said Clemens Heldmaier, the district’s general manager. J. O. Oeswein, who lives near the former gunnery school, called the area “an historic place,” adding that some residents fear developers might wipe out the little that remains.<sup>13</sup>

According to Oeswein there were 48 structures associated with the anti-aircraft school.

“It is worth mentioning that most of the (18)

foundations of the buildings at Farallone Heights are still evident and can be identified from the site map,” he said. “It would certainly be a shame to see these foundations destroyed via development and lose what is undoubtedly an important part of our national and coastside history.”

The facility was huge and trained over 320,000 men during its four-year existence. The men later were part of the crews on ships that ranged from destroyers to battleships and aircraft carriers.

The station newspaper, dubbed the *Ack Ack*, said the mission was to train people to “knock the Rising Sun from the Pacific Skies.” The training camp became vitally important when the Japanese resorted to using kamikaze suicide planes during the latter part of the war.

The center’s land extended from the Montara lighthouse to Half Moon Bay where planes took off towing targets. The *Ack Ack*’s final edition published in September 1945 ran a photo of a B-26 bomber pulling



a target. The caption noted that during 1944 there had been 1,000 such flights from what it called “The Moss Beach Flight Strip,” (really the Half Moon Bay Flight Strip, see page 4) today’s Half Moon Bay Airport. The installation eventually included six barracks, an administration building, eight ammunition magazines, a hangar and a theater. The weapons used in training ranged from 20 and 40 millimeter rapid firing guns, the latter capable of firing 480 rounds per minute, to five-inch cannons, referring to the diameter of the shell. The armed guard trained on three-inch guns, described as “more easily controlled.”

### Woman Towed Targets

There is at least one historic marker to note the Half Moon Bay area’s role in training anti-aircraft crews. The sign on the trail adjacent to the Devil’s Slide tunnel honors three women who spent part of 1944 flying planes that towed targets. The interpretive panel has a headline reading “Women Pilots Make Moving Targets.”

The women were members of the Women’s Air Service Pilots, or WASPs. Like the merchant marine sailors, the women’s service was little known and both were considered civilian despite their wartime duties. The federal government eventually awarded veterans status to the female pilots in 1977, but it wasn’t until 1988 that the sailors were granted the same honor, and it took an order from a federal judge to do it.<sup>14</sup>

WASP pilot Shirley Thackara is credited with making the “target” remark that is recorded on the Devil’s Slide panel. Thackara, who passed away in Carmel in 2015, made a similar comment when she was interviewed in 2010 by the *Greenwich Times* in Greenwich, Connecticut, where she was once a resident. “We got very angry at being fired at, naturally,” said Thackara.

Did the WASPs actually “tow” targets? Perhaps some did, but most likely they operated remote controlled target planes called PQ-14s that can be considered a forerunner of today’s drones, although they could also be piloted and were when flown from airport to airport. According to the website *WASP on the Web*,

the women at the Half Moon Bay flight strip flew the AT-11 “Kansans” and the UC-78 “Bobcats,” the mothership from which they controlled the PQ-14, dubbed the “Cadet.”<sup>15</sup> The *Ack-Ack* newspaper made a brief mention of gun crews scrambling to dodge “runaway radio controlled target planes.”

### Dogs of War

Another sprawling military installation was located at the old H&H Ranch near San Carlos. It was one of four Army training camps for war dogs set up after Pearl Harbor. By the end of the war, the San Carlos post was nearly exclusive in training dogs for the dangerous role of mine detection.

Construction of the California canine center started in October 1942 and was completed by December when the first batch of dogs and their handlers arrived. The official name of the camp operated by the Quartermaster Corps was the War Dog Reception and Training Center.

“Kindness was the motto at San Carlos,” Clarence Pfaffenberger wrote in *The New Knowledge of Dog Behavior*, published in 1963. Pfaffenberger, vice president of Guide Dogs for The Blind, said very few of the dogs were trained to attack and pointed out that after the war many became guide dogs. The dogs, he insisted, were “friendly with everyone.” Maybe, but this writer vividly remembers when he was seven years old that a neighbor’s dog, just returned from duty with the Coast Guard, was anything but friendly, barking and lunging toward him. Luckily the animal was still in the crate the service sent him home in.

The neighbor’s dog was a Doberman Pinscher, one of more than 30 breeds initially enlisted for the war effort. Eventually the program was limited to Dobermans, German Shepherds, Belgian Sheep dogs, Collies, Eskimo dogs and Giant Schnauzers. The “4Fs” not acceptable for military service included Great Danes and any hunting breed, the former because its large size made it difficult to handle and the latter because they became too easily distracted by the smell of other



William Garbo, Sr. trained four dogs in messenger training while at San Carlos, including Smoky (above). He qualified two dogs to go with him to New Guinea. Courtesy of the Museum of San Carlos History.

animals. The public donated 18,000 dogs, according to an Army report written in 1958. About 50 percent were actually trained.<sup>16</sup>

Pfaffenberger was interviewed after the war about war dogs attacking civilians. He conceded a few dogs were trained to attack for “show purposes,” which might have meant shows to promote bond drives. He said the only case he knew of in which a former war dog attacked involved some Peninsula youngsters who “teased and aggravated a K9 veteran.” Most dogs, he said, were trained to alert troops to danger or to carry messages.<sup>17</sup>

“They would attack only at the signal given by their Army master,” he said, adding that the dog would “jump at the arm, not the leg.” Attacking the leg would make the dog “an easy target for a bullet or bayonet.”

The San Carlos training center was used as a staging area for Army dogs shipped to the Pacific. It held a maximum of 550 military personnel, 15 civilians and

1,200 dogs at a time. During the war, 4,500 dogs and 2,500 men passed through the San Carlos facility that closed in October 1944. Doghouses lined the hillside and from a distance looked like a field of mushrooms. Some neighbors complained about the howling and barking during the night, but since it was wartime there was little people could do but grin and bear it.

The watershed land of the San Francisco Water Department and some privately owned open space were used for field training. Jim Scherba of San Carlos said that after the war he and other kids rode their bikes in the area and played in the abandoned buildings. “That’s all gone now,” he said. “Crestview and Hallmark run right through what used to be the camp.”

### Bombs Drop in Redwood City

Not many people know that Redwood City was bombed during World War II in a friendly-fire incident in, appropriately, the Friendly Acres neighborhood. The military kept a tight lid on the details of the accident involving a practice bomb that took place six weeks before the war ended. Nevertheless, the incident was front page news in both the *San Mateo Times* and *Redwood City Tribune* on July 16, 1945. It would have been difficult to keep the bombing a complete secret. Too many people saw it.

The witnesses included T.H. Ferris who said the bomb sounded “like a Fourth of July pinwheel” as it headed to earth. Some eyewitnesses reported that the pilot circled as if he knew the bomb fell and he wanted to check for damage.

The *Redwood City Tribune* said the fragments were closely grouped and the hole was small showing “the charge was not large.” The bomb crashed near a chicken coop just 150 feet from a home.

“The object passed our heads and fell to earth some distance away,” said Mrs. Walter Deal. “We saw smoke coming from the spot where it fell.”

Where the plane came from was not announced. Neither was its destination, although a good bet would be the *USS Thompson*, an old World War I destroyer

used for target practice in the San Francisco Bay. What's left of the *Thompson* is still out there near the line with Alameda County, clearly marked on charts as "wreck." Kayakers occasionally venture aboard the rusting hulk, which can be seen by airplane passengers during their approach to San Francisco.

The *Thompson's* remains may very well serve as a tombstone for a line of ships that more than proved their worth. While the *Thompson* was a punching bag for pilots, other ships of its class, all of them obsolete for decades, were fighting in both the Atlantic and Pacific. One, the *USS Ward*, sank a Japanese submarine at Pearl Harbor just moments before the naval base was bombed on December 7, 1941.

The *Thompson*, a 314-foot Clemson-class ship, never fired a shot in anger. Still, it had a brush with history. The ship was part of a flotilla of 14 destroyers involved in one of the Navy's worst peacetime disasters. The ships were headed from San Francisco to San Diego on September 8, 1923, when the lead destroyer made a wrong turn and smashed onto jagged rocks near Point Conception. Seven ships were lost and 23 men killed. The *Thompson* was last in line and its skipper did not make the fatal turn.

Not much is left of the *Thompson*. The four smokestacks that earned the destroyers their nickname "four stackers" were destroyed long ago. After the war, amateur sailors mined the *Thompson* for lead used in practice bombs and turned it in to keels for sailboats.<sup>18</sup>

A story in the 1976 *Redwood City Tribune* noted that during the practice bombing runs the ship was "attacked relentlessly by Army Air Corps P-38s, P-51s, Navy Corsairs and other craft." The newspaper also reported that in the early 1950s material salvaged from the former target ship was being sold to scrap dealers. One Sequoia High student said he got as much as \$300 a day for the metal – a hefty sum in those days.

The unidentified student also said he and his friends held parties aboard the wreck. "We made fires on the deck to roast hot dogs and generally partied it up," he said. "The old ship was good to me."

### James O. Clifford, Sr.

James O. Clifford, Sr., spent forty years in journalism--a career divided between United Press International and the Associated Press. His honors include the UPI Broadcast Excellence Award and the San Francisco Press Club's feature story award. Since retiring in 2000, Clifford's byline has appeared in *La Peninsula*, *The San Mateo Daily Journal*, *Climate* magazine, *Spectrum* and the *Journal of Local History*. He is the author of "Philip's Code: No News is Good News - to a Killer." Raised and educated in San Francisco, Jim and his family have lived in Redwood City nearly 50 years.

<sup>1</sup> "History and Photos of the Merchant Marine Cadet Corps Life in the 1940's," *American Merchant Marine at War*, accessed October 8, 2016, <http://www.usmm.org/ccphotos.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Mitch Postel, *San Mateo: A Centennial History* (San Francisco, CA: Scottwall Associates, 1994), 227.

<sup>3</sup> "Training Here Runs 3 Months," *Burlingame Advance*, August 27, 1943, 9.

<sup>4</sup> "Large Outdoor Training Pool Will Be Built," *Burlingame Advance*, August 27, 1943, 10.

<sup>5</sup> "Cadets Learn to 'High Dive' Into the Sea," *Burlingame Advance*, August 27, 1943, 10.

<sup>6</sup> John Cattermole, interview by James O. Clifford, Sr., Fall 2015.

<sup>7</sup> "Training," *Burlingame Advance*, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Postel, *San Mateo*, 227.

<sup>9</sup> "History of the U.S. Merchant Marine Cadet Corps," *American Merchant Marine at War*, accessed October 8, 2016, <http://www.usmm.org/cadetcorps.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Svanevik and Shirley Burgett, *Class Act: College of San Mateo: A History* (Custom and Limited Editions, 1996), 1.

<sup>11</sup> James O. Clifford, Sr., "San Mateo and the Merchant Marine," *Journal of Local History*, Fall 2015, 7.

<sup>12</sup> "Gunnery Highly Important," *Burlingame Advance*, August 27, 1943, 12.

<sup>13</sup> Clemens Heldmaier and J. O. Oeswein, emails to James O. Clifford, Sr., March 12, 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Clifford, "San Mateo," 8.

<sup>15</sup> "AAF Bases & Fields," *Wasp on the Web*, accessed October 8, 2016, <http://wingsacrossamerica.us/wasp/baselist.htm>.

<sup>16</sup> "Dogs and National Defense," Department of the Army Quartermaster General, 1958.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Pat Frayne of the War Relocation Authority, Bancroft Library, 1970-71.

<sup>18</sup> *Journal of Local History*, Fall, 2010, 12.

# San Mateo Junior College: Supporting the War Effort

by Mitchell P. Postel

Administrators, faculty members, and students of the San Mateo Junior College were affected by the onset of World War II. Cliff Pierce was student body president in 1941 and recalled that “everyone just seemed to lose interest in education. What did a degree matter right then? People started to drift away into the service or into some kind of war work.”

Faculty members joined the military, too. Most, like Phil Morse, assumed positions as teachers. Morse taught a variety of subjects while with the Army Air Corps, including aircraft identification, Morse Code, meteorology, and radio procedure.

Enrollment at San Mateo Junior College predictably declined. Students attending the college in 1944 numbered only 372, the lowest total since the early years of the school’s existence. The students that did remain, mostly coeds, kept themselves busy with a number of war-related activities. Pierce tells us that they started up a newsletter which they sent to those in the service: “on the sad side, they’d keep us posted on casualties among our classmates, and the list kept adding and adding on. On the happy side, they’d have pictures of our favorite college spots....”

Students also became quite involved with the local unit of the American Red Cross. They knitted, folded surgical dressings, and read to blind students from Dibble General Hospital in Menlo Park. Dr. Frank Stanger, a college professor, explained that those wounded boys from Dibble, clad in their dark red uniforms, had quite an impact on the campus. Some were undergoing plastic surgery and brought home, to a degree, “the realities of war.”

Some of the girls joined the nurse’s aide group. Many students worked in the “War Stamp” and “War Bond” campaigns, raising thousands of dollars for the cause.

Soon the college itself became devoted to the

war effort. Faculty members Fred Klyver and Erford McAllister organized a Victory Garden and canning project on unused land at the college’s Delaware Street property. The government furnished the college with canning equipment which was placed in a temporary building. This program became popular with residents up and down the Peninsula from every background. James Tormey, an English instructor who later became County Superintendent of Schools, recalled that:

One of the ladies [from Hillsborough] would come down two or three times a week to her plot, driven by her chauffeur who would stay there, not to help her on her garden – he had a plot next to hers. That was his plot. He worked on his plot and his boss worked on her plot. We had many such cases.

While the college’s program became the top-producing center of its kind in northern California, other more subtle things were occurring at the gardens and in the canning shed. In fact, Tormey believed that this effort was:

...the best integration – and possibly the first real integration situation in the entire county. In the canning center people of all races, colors, mixtures, and everything else, every status of life, would work right across these preparation tables – maybe a lady from one of the estates down at Woodside and across from her somebody over in, well, one of the less-favored economic sections.

Of all the wartime activities the college became involved with the one that helped the real military effort the most was its radar program. Radar had become an essential technology during World War II, and the radar school at San Mateo became one of the best on the West Coast. Much of this was due to the fact that



two of the best radar men in the country, Dr. Jacob Wiens and John Hecomovich, led the program. Late in 1943, both left the college to work on the atomic bomb. Tormey revealed that getting the program going was no easy matter:

We broke the laws of God and man to get the equipment and supplies we had to have together. This was when there were priorities, and you had to have government slips; we purchased without them to get going.

When the State Department of Education began to balk at reimbursing funds spent on the projects, Tormey alluded to the national emergency and the need for quick action. He also asserted that San Mateo Junior College would continue with or without reimbursement or even ADA. Funds were released thereafter.

Once the radar school went into operation it functioned 22 hours a day, six days a week. Individual students spent 48 hours a week in class each and every week. As Tormey described it: "If Christmas Day came on Wednesday, too bad, Mac; this class is on

Wednesday, too." Eventually over 700 men graduated from the radar school.

The San Mateo Junior College became the unquestioned leader in civilian wartime activities for San Mateo County. The programs listed above contributed to that recognition, yet it was before World War II began that the college began to prepare for its role. With war clouds gathering, Tormey convinced Charles "Jum" Morris, president of the college, that an extra \$35,000 to \$40,000 should be added to the adult school budget as an emergency fund. The board of trustees, "after a little bit of shock, approved the "special item." Two days after Pearl Harbor, Tormey went before the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors, plunked down this fund in the form of a single check and said, "We have this available; we will undertake to finance civilian defense training whether state funds become available for this or not." In this way the college district assumed responsibility for first aid "and other kinds of emergency situations" for the entire county.

Excerpted from Mitchell P. Postel, "The Junior-Community College Movement of San Mateo County: 1922-1987," *La Peninsula* 24, No. 2 (1987).



"Clifford Girls," named after high school teacher Rue Clifford, at South San Francisco Hospitality House with service men. Courtesy South San Francisco Historical Society.



Advertising for volunteers at a community event in San Mateo.

# At Home in San Mateo County During World War II

by Joan Levy



Boy Scouts with material collected in a scrap drive. The cannon to the left, believed to have been from World War I, was salvaged from Central Park in San Mateo.

Local activity fell into two categories during the early part of the War. There were preparations for an attack here at home and support for the War activities abroad.

After Pearl Harbor, there was fear that we could be attacked here on the Pacific Coast. Some of the Civilian Defense was well publicized. Obvious to many was the Aircraft Warning Service. "Plane spotters" were volunteers who watched the skies day and night with binoculars to identify any planes seen in the air. They were trained with pictures and silhouettes of all known types of aircraft so that presumably they could recognize any threat to our coast. This surveillance went on for eighteen months to two years and involved as many as 300 volunteers in San Mateo County.

There were also Decontamination Stations located in South San Francisco, San Mateo and Redwood City. These were a precaution in case of gas attacks. Also,

the Blood Bank stored 1,546 units of frozen plasma intended for emergency use.

Air Raid Wardens were assigned to patrol residential neighborhoods in the event of an attack. Lights had to be dimmed so as not to create targets. "Blackout curtains" covered windows and some light bulbs were painted blue to reduce visibility. Test runs with air raid sirens were conducted to assure our readiness. Improvised shelters were identified to protect the public should they be away from home at the time of an attack. Everyone knew of these preparations.

Other preparations were less well publicized so as not to panic the general public. An Emergency Medical Aid Committee was prepared to handle 3,000 potential victims. Mobile Units were on call ready to set up First Aid Stations. There were eight major casualty stations in large buildings near hospitals with essential



Civilian Defense included a fire suppression unit. The man on the left is holding a gas mask.

materials stored on site. Carpenters and plumbers were on stand-by to make any necessary repairs. All hospitals had canvas and rods prepared for conversion to stretchers if great numbers were needed.

There was a detailed plan to evacuate the whole population of the Peninsula if necessary. All buses, and owners of station wagons and power boats were identified for mass transportation use. Evacuation routes were mapped out. The schools identified all small children and they were provided with metal “dog tags” in case they became separated from parents or teachers.

Water tanks were camouflaged with vines so as not to be targeted, and over time, 200,000 potted plants were available for this use.

First in support of the War abroad, of course, was manpower in recruitment into military service. Then

there was financial support in the form of War Bond sales. Even children bought stamps at school to save up for bonds. United Service Organizations (USO) stations were established to provide support and entertainment for the troops stationed locally.

The American Women’s Voluntary Service (AWVS) organized to do recreation work and volunteer help to the other agencies. They provided Day Care for the children of working or volunteering mothers. They collected materials to send to the troops overseas. The Home Food Products Committee encouraged Victory Gardens and educated homemakers on food preservation by home canning. The Victory Gardens were to grow fruits and vegetables to offset shortages due to foods being provided to the military. Then, of course, there were the salvage drives to collect essential materials like cans and other metal items to recycle into military equipment. The Red Cross was also very active in various ways. All were well organized here in San Mateo County.<sup>1</sup>

We hear about all of these activities during World War II, and sometimes one asks, “But what were the women doing?” Here again, stories today abound about “Rosie the Riveter” or the women who served in the early military branches, but the vast majority of women stayed at home, often dealing with raising children, perhaps while their husbands were away at war. Civilian plane spotting, Victory Gardens and many other projects were taken on by the women at home.

In 2014, Christine Witzel published a book, *She Also Served*,<sup>2</sup> which is a collection of letters exchanged by her mother and father during his career in the Navy. Lt. Comdr. Frederick Witzel was already a naval officer in Washington, D. C., when World War II began. His wife, Virgilia, and daughter, Joanna, moved into a “guest cottage” at her parents’ home in Menlo Park for the duration of his service in the Pacific (Christine was born after the War).

They usually exchanged V-mail letters, and Virgilia usually wrote one a day. V-mail were one-page letters that the government filmed and then sent overseas on





Virgilia Witzel checking for mail in Menlo Park. She corresponded frequently with her husband, a Navy Lt. Commander. Photo courtesy of Christine Witzel.



Virgilia Witzel in her Victory Garden. Photo courtesy of Christine Witzel.

microfilm. It could take weeks for a letter to arrive at its destination. At the end point all the letters were printed and distributed to the recipients, thus saving much space in shipment. It was limiting on the individuals, however, in that the space was small and the printouts were on 4x5 inch paper. The military didn't allow men to date the letters, so the Witzels numbered them, as they often arrived out of sequence. Of course the letters were subject to censorship, and they were also not allowed to mention where the men were located.

The letters tell quite a bit about life here in San Mateo County. Virgilia Witzel had been born in San Francisco, so living in this area was not new to her. There was space on the Menlo Park property, as she wrote quite a bit about planting and tending her vegetable garden and even raising chickens for their eggs. Virgilia wrote of her volunteer work, helping with the salvage drive and making bandages with the Red Cross one day a week. Her major efforts, however seemed to be with her garden, as she explains in detail her battles with birds and snails.

Food was a problem due to limited availability, high

cost, and rationing. The garden and chickens solved some of this problem. Rationing of gas kept them fairly isolated, and as Virgilia explains, food would be cheaper for her to buy at the Commissary, but then she would have to spend the gas to get to Moffett Field. Their gas allotment apparently came to about 4 gallons a week, she said, so they often walked or bicycled around town and took public transportation when they went to the City.

She explained rationing in her letter of August 26, 1943. "Red stamps are for meat, cheese and shortening. Blue stamps are for canned goods....Each person has about 96 points for a two month period on the blue. Since fruit like peaches, pears, etc. are from 21 to 24 points a can, you can see we don't use many...Butter is ten points a pound in the red, beef is also ten points a pound....Most things that are not rationed are limited - one or two to a customer. Jell-O is very hard to get and no more chocolate pudding."

The garden definitely seemed to give Virgilia a feeling of pride and accomplishment as she would describe meals prepared solely from the produce grown. On

August 17, 1943, she tells of “a lot of fun” putting up 4 quarts of pears, 5 pints of apple sauce and one quart of plums. “I love to do it....Jelly making is a bit more complicated, and I won’t tackle it under present circumstances.” The gardening must have become tiring, however, as in her letter of October 9, 1943, she indicates that next year’s garden will be concentrated in a smaller spot.

In the October 1944 issue of *La Peninsula*, Frank Stanger, founder of the San Mateo County Historical Museum, called for readers to consider that someday history would be written about life on the San Mateo County home front. He urged them to preserve illustrative materials and make a private collection. Better yet, he suggested, collect it for the Historical Museum.

One of the people who took Stanger’s advice was Elen Nordstrand. She created a scrapbook of her activities and sent it to the Historical Museum. On the first page, Elen indicated the scrapbook to be “Clippings from the *Redwood City Tribune* about war activities of the ‘Write a Fighter Corps’ and partial clippings of activities of the ‘Jr. American Women’s Voluntary Services’ under the direction of advisor Mrs. Elen C. Nordstrand.” It turned out to be more than just that.

There once was a popular radio show, “Jack Armstrong, the All American Boy,” that was regularly followed by many of America’s children. It featured a fictional wholesome boy in a dramatic adventure series. The show was sponsored by General Mills, promoting Wheaties breakfast cereal. When the War came along, it was only natural that Jack would encourage activities among his young followers in support of our fighting men. According to its manual, Jack organized the “Write a Fighter Corps” (WAFC) in accordance with the requirements of the U.S. War and Navy Departments. Each “Corps” of boys and girls was to organize around a Senior Leader with a squad of five “pilots”. Later the size of the groups was expanded. They were to listen to Jack’s program daily to hear the latest news about the

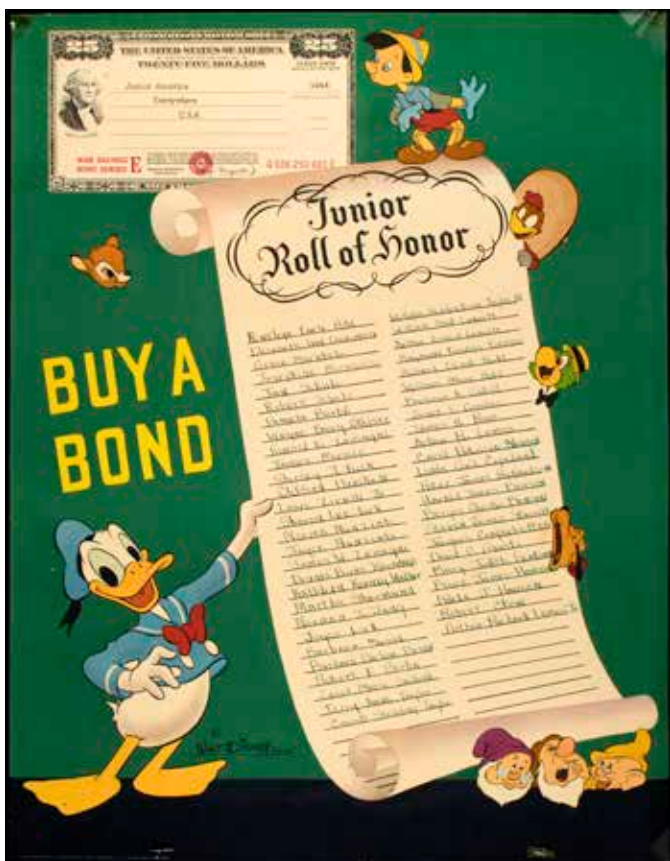
project. An adult advisor was also needed. One sent in for the organizing kit which included an instruction manual on what to do. Then the squad should report their activities to the radio show.

Squad #124888 of Redwood City was organized by Mrs. Nordstrand and she registered the founding “pilots,” including her own two children, Barbara and Robert. The purpose of the group was to write one good letter a month to a fighter in the U.S. Armed Forces. There were many rules. The fighter must be someone you know - family member or neighbor or friend. “The war department didn’t approve of letters to strangers.” All news must be happy and uplifting. The manual had suggestions on topics and many “dos and don’ts.” The registration kit included stars to give out for meeting quotas and bars to wear on which to display the stars. There were suggestions on how to make official looking stationery and instructions on how to use V-mail for overseas letters. The original manual and some stars and bars were pasted in Elen’s scrapbook.

In addition to the basic letter writing campaign, the WAFC was also involved in the other home front activities. The squadron report for 1942-3 included the amount of paper, magazines, tin cans, scraps and rags and pennies collected for the war effort. They also collected things to give to the Red Cross to send to soldiers, such as soap and lighter fluid.

A *Redwood City Tribune* clipping dated February 16, 1943, reported that the local Squadron’s splendid report was read by Jack Armstrong over the coast to coast radio show. A February 27 clipping also said that through the efforts of the WAFC, Mr. William P. Kyne of Bay Meadows and the California Jockey Club had pledged \$10,000 in War Bonds. While the children were certainly active in this group, it would seem that Mrs. Nordstrand herself must also have been involved.

A July 17, 1943, clipping from *Liberty Magazine* glued into the scrapbook carried a story about the Jack Armstrong’s WAFC and mentioned young Barbara Nordstrand and her involvement as Squadron Leader of the local group.



War bond poster from the San Mateo County Historical Association Archives with the names of San Mateo County children who had saved their money to purchase a war bond.

Another activity the local WAFC launched in 1943 was to raise money for War Bonds. The “kids” created two life sized dummies named Ooee Gooee and Hennie Hinkel. They were made of scraps of fabric, and the idea was to sell off pieces of them for War Bond pledges. The newspaper clippings showed photos providing publicity for the auction event held at Sequoia High School.

The WAFC was aimed at children between 6 and 13 years old. Barbara Nordstrand had been active with the group, serving as Squadron Leader, but she was outgrowing them. It was July 28, 1943, when Elen Nordstrand started a Junior American Women’s Voluntary Service group with 11 girls, including Barbara. This group was open to girl graduates from WAFC. By December the group had grown to 21 members. Since Elen was a member of the adult AWVS group, it was

logical that she would organize a junior group.

Some of the activities of the Jr. AWVS were similar to the WAFC. They collected items for scrap drives and raised money for War Bonds, but they also baked cakes for sales and baked cookies to help at the USO. They would solicit merchants for prizes to use at War Bond rallies and other more adult pursuits.

Included in the scrapbook is a letter to Barbara from a hospitalized soldier, thanking her for the “mighty swell” Christmas Box he had received from her via the Jr. AWVS. Apparently the gift had contained candy, a mystery book, soap and other toiletries. He described for her his living conditions in the field hospital and had apparently enclosed as a souvenir, some Japanese currency that had been in use in the Philippines.

The American Women’s Voluntary Service (AWVS) was an organization founded in January 1940, following the pattern of a British group that had been active for years. The American association was originally made up of wealthy socialites who believed that America would eventually enter the war, and they wanted to help prepare our country. By the time of Pearl Harbor, the group numbered 18,000, but during the war that number rose to 325,000. It was no longer limited to just “society women”. The AWVS provided any number of supporting activities, including ambulance drivers, navigation and aerial photography and aircraft spotting. Many served away from home.<sup>3</sup>

Another scrapbook in the Museum Archives had to do specifically with USO activities. Mrs. R. E. Pettingill was the USO General Chairman for San Mateo, Burlingame and Hillsborough, also known as the Tri-Cities Area. She announced in the *Burlingame Advance* of October 30, 1942, that a USO Officers’ Club was to open November 14 at the Ben Franklin Hotel. A clubroom would be located on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor. This operation would be in addition to the USO House at 3<sup>rd</sup> and El Camino in San Mateo that was open to enlisted men.

One of the USO activities mentioned was collecting scrapbooks. The Jr. AWVS had also mentioned similar scrapbook drives, and one would wonder what was so important about scrapbooks. According to a clipping





Mrs. R. E. Pettingill plays piano at the Tri-Cities USO in San Mateo for servicemen.

from January 23, 1943, in the *San Mateo Times*, serialized stories from magazines were pasted into them, so service men and women could read an entire story in one volume of a scrapbook. A note reminded workers that they needed two copies of each magazine, as the back of each page was lost in the pasting.

The newspaper clippings of USO activities also mentioned the need for people to make their spare rooms available for visiting wives or family members of the military. Families of servicemen would try to make visits to our area before their loved ones were deployed overseas, so the local USO helped to find places for them to stay for a few days. One clipping reported that 32 people were placed in one month due to such USO efforts.

Another USO activity, mentioned in a *San Mateo Times* article in April 1943, was the organization of "Ride Stations." These were street-side depots similar to bus stops where GIs needing transportation could wait until motorists voluntarily stopped to pick them up.

Mona Janssen compiled a book of "Reminiscences and Reports of the San Mateo County Chapter of the American Red Cross from 1941-1945." While the



Mrs. Pettingill at the USO Ride Station at El Camino and Third Avenue in San Mateo.

Red Cross was open to both men and women, many of the activities on the home front were carried on by women. The report included summaries from various communities submitted by different local members. Their activities give a peek in to what was going on here. These special projects were in addition to the usual tasks performed by the Red Cross that were mentioned in the report.

In Pescadero, according to Mrs. Louise Williamson, there were two small military installations nearby. One was the Coastal Firing Range and the other was the Civil Aeronautics Activities Base. There were no recreational facilities for the men at these places, so the local Red Cross chapter set up a Community Center at the old Methodist Church in Pescadero, providing a billiard table and a piano. Refreshments were kept on hand and various sports and entertainment scheduled.

In a similar situation, Mrs. E. C. Peck of the South San Francisco Chapter organized a canteen unit starting in March 1942 to provide coffee and sandwiches nightly for the 20 Coast Artillerymen stationed at the Western Pipe and Steel Company. That company was involved in shipbuilding during the war, so apparently they had a

military guard there.

From June 1, 1944, through June 15, 1946, a special newspaper, *The Home Front News*, was printed monthly by the Three City War Council for the Tri-City area (San Mateo, Burlingame and Hillsborough). Each issue was four to six pages, and was mailed to any service person from those towns whose name and military address had been submitted. All news was very upbeat. The stated purpose was to “bring a little touch of home to the ...boy camped in Florida or Oklahoma or the South Pacific.” The front page headlines often dealt with employment opportunities when the “boys come home,” or the latest information about the newly passed Veteran’s Benefits or local political news. An amusing cartoon usually appeared in the paper.

The second page dealt with news of service people from the area, “G.I. Notes.” Again, only pleasant news was printed. Word of promotions and decorations made up most of the articles. They also reported the successful volunteer activities of local groups. In one issue, they mentioned that more than 50 local women had joined the Women’s Army Corps (WAC) in the previous month with almost as many joining the Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES), a branch of the United States Naval Reserve. Then the paper added that these “little angels” will work at whatever they are assigned to do.

The third page of the paper carried reports on sports of national as well as local teams. They bemoaned the shortage of talent for the teams because so many men were away at war. The last page often carried photos of local street scenes or familiar buildings, and an occasional pin-up girl. Over the run of the paper, the pin-ups became more frequent and featured local girls by name. There was no advertising, but the paper carried a list of sponsors. The San Mateo County Historical Association Archives have copies of the complete run of this newspaper.

Beulah C. Schindler wrote of “Latest Society News” and reported engagements and weddings along with other pertinent tidbits. A regular column by Bernice



Despite the newspaper reports, some local women dressed a little less “feminine” for their volunteer work.

Blacher dealt with what the women were doing. It appeared on page one. The name of the column started as “The Gals at Home” and became “As Time Goes By,” “Gossip About the Gals” and “Facts About A Pin Up Gal” in various issues. In it Bernice assured the servicemen that women were active in volunteer work and eagerly waiting for their return. One column told the men that their girlfriends were not running around wearing slacks all the time, but were retaining their femininity for the anticipated return of their men. A description of the typical “lassie” started with her long shiny, wavy, shoulder length hair, glossy red lipstick and on down her colorful smoothly fitting flowered dress to her shapely legs. Of course she was “wearing your insignia over her heart and she’s waiting for you.” The column seems to have intentionally painted some of the most titillating pictures probably deemed acceptable for those days.

Bernice’s column informed the readers that women were as excited about receiving mail from the servicemen as the boys were in receiving mail from home. But, it warned, watch out about writing of



The San Mateo County Chapter of the American Red Cross runs a canteen at an event at Dibble Hospital, Menlo Park.

matters that the censors disapproved, because then the letters would arrive all covered in black ink, obliterating the offending details.

They even ran a story in June 1945 about Bernice writing her column, with photos of her at work. In one issue, the column outlined the patriotic voluntary work the “gals” were doing working as nurse’s aides, USO Hostesses handing out coffee, etc. She pointed out that in the evenings there was little to do unless one was touring with a USO theater group to entertain servicemen in the area. The columnist assured them that there was no real social life while the “boys are away.” There was no clubbing and no dancing unless helping at a USO function.

She also wrote of the activities of groups like the AWVS. She reported that in the Tri-Cities, it was organized on December 4, 1941, and the membership had reached 250. They visited men in the camps and the military dog training center in San Carlos. One job they did was sewing and doing clothing repair for the boys - work that had been “done before by their mothers.” The project was called the “Button Brigade

to Help the Boys.”

The San Mateo County Historical Association Archives also has a file of newspaper clippings dealing with local people during World War II. The *San Matean* was the student paper of San Mateo Junior College, and on September 22, 1942, it was announced on page 1 that former Spanish teacher Mrs. Marsh had joined the WAVES. On page 3 they advertised “Talent needed for Military Shows.” The Peninsula Little Theater group was having try-outs for “Plays for the Camps.” It seems that there was a demand from all over the Bay Area for entertainment for the military. The student paper also carried information about former students who were now serving their country.

Incidentally, in the September 29, 1943 issue, a review of a student assembly entertainment mentioned that the emcee for the event was Merv Griffin. A local boy, Merv would have been about 18 at that time.

Lorraine Ames of Hillsborough wrote an article that was published in *Life* magazine June 6, 1942, describing her experience in becoming a nurse’s aide at San Mateo Community Hospital. It was entitled, “Society Girl Learns Volunteer Hospital Work to Help Her Nation”. She said she had never worked before except for the Community Fund Drive, but in January she decided to play less tennis and volunteer for the war effort. She first visited the office of the AWVS, but the only openings they had at that time were for ambulance drivers, and they already had a list of volunteers. She next approached the Red Cross and she enrolled in a nurse’s aide class. There, along with 29 other women, she learned the skills necessary to help at the hospital.

Voluntary nurse’s aides and nurse’s aide training are often mentioned as activities of the women here at home. The idea was that they could help out at local hospitals and clinics that were short handed because so many trained registered nurses were away serving the with the military.

As the War came to a close, the newspaper clippings in the scrapbooks note the gradual closing of local facilities for the service people. The last issue of the



*Home Front News* was published June 15, 1946. In 1946, Mrs. Pettingill announced the closure of the Tri-Cities USO would take place April 30. By that time, she added, 500,000 guests had been entertained by 3,056 volunteers at their facilities. The AWVS disbanded in 1945, seeing that its work was done. However, it was revived a few years later to help serve veterans.

Many historians agree that World War II brought about monumental changes in the role of women. San Mateo County is a microcosm of this experience. The shortage of manpower opened the doors for women to be employed or to volunteer in many nontraditional occupations. They proved that they could do whatever was needed. Families continued to function without the customary breadwinner at home. After the War and the men returned, there was some retrenching into the previous traditional roles, but the memory of what women could do still existed, especially, I'm sure, in the minds of the women. Things were never the same again.

### Joan Levy

Joan M. Levy volunteers in the San Mateo County Historical Association Archives. In the past, she has served on the Board of Directors and been a docent at the Sanchez Adobe. A third generation Californian, Joan has always been interested in California history. After retiring in 1989, she returned to college to complete her B.A. in American History with an emphasis on California and Latin America. She has a specific interest in Northern California in 1846. For five years she contributed local history articles for the *San Mateo Daily Journal*.

<sup>1</sup> San Mateo County's war preparedness was described in "War History in San Mateo County," *La Peninsula* 2, no. 6 (1944): 2-5.

<sup>2</sup> Christine Witzel, ed., *She Also Served: Letters from a Navy Wife* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Nason, "The American Women's Voluntary Services," *Museum Textile Services* (blog), February 18, 2013, <http://www.museumtextiles.com/blog/theamerican-womens-voluntary-services>.



WAC recruitment drive in San Mateo County.



Students could purchase stamps for bonds. When they had enough stamps, the stamp book was traded for a war bond.



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- Salvage and War Bond Drives
- USO Centers and Events for Service Members
- Wartime Hospitals
- Victory Gardens

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All San Mateo County Historical Association members are invited to a special exhibit opening for *Peninsula at War! San Mateo County's World War II Legacy* on Wednesday, December 7, 2016, the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the bombing at Pearl Harbor. The reception starts at 5 p.m. with remarks at 6 p.m.

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*USO Party in San Mateo, 1944*





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