

The History Of Naval Support Activity Mid-South

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## The Beginning

The history of the Naval Support Activity Mid-South ironically begins with the birth of military aviation itself. In 1917, the use of military aircraft was in its infancy. In fact, the only aviation aircraft in the arsenal at that time were owned and maintained by the Army Signal Corps Aviation Section, barely three years old. It was an under-funded little trusted branch of the Army and seen by many bureaucrats as a waste of money and resources. <sup>1,2</sup>

Millington, the site of the Naval Support Activity Mid-South and the former site of Park Field Army Signal Corps Aviation School, was an unincorporated hamlet of 554 according to the 1910 Census. <sup>3,4,5</sup>

It was on April 6, 1917 that the United States entered WW I. The war in Europe and the Aviation Section was ill prepared to fight that, or any other war. The entire corps consisted of barely 130 officer, 1,087 enlisted men and owned a total complement of 250 aircraft. <sup>6</sup> This is significant because the Allied Forces were very specific in both the quantity of aircraft and the number of men needed to support the war effort. The request was for forty-five hundred planes, five thousand pilots and fifty thousand mechanics. <sup>1</sup>

In order to meet the allied request, the Army Signal Corps Aviation Section had to expand very rapidly indeed. Because there were only three training schools for the United States Army pilots<sup>7</sup>, the search for suitable training sites became an urgent mission with

top priority. Since the mission of training pilots had to begin immediately, even before aircraft were built and delivered, the United States looked to the north. Canadian forces, needing suitable winter-training sites, agreed to train U. S. pilots during the summer months and into the fall as long as weather permitted. In return, Canadian pilots would be allowed to use southern bases in the U.S. to train pilots during the winter months when Canadian airfields were frequently closed due to fiercely cold weather conditions. <sup>1,8</sup>

This bought the U.S. time to select sites and build aviation schools from scratch.<sup>8</sup> Not only did this enable the Canadian and American pilots to train together in Allied tactics, it stretched training to 10 months out of the year, greatly shortening the training cycle and increasing flight hours for fledgling aviators. Potential training sites became an even greater priority with the greatest emphasis placed on southern sites,<sup>8</sup> that would provide the most favorable conditions and allow the longest training cycles per year.<sup>9</sup>

The Memphis Chamber of Commerce along with business and political leaders had already attempted to secure a cantonment site in the Memphis area. Up until this time, their efforts had been unsuccessful. Seeing the opportunity re-presenting itself in the form of an aviation training command, an Emergency Committee on Military Affairs was formed and then specialized into an Aviation Subcommittee to inform the Army of the facilities available in the Memphis area. <sup>1,9,10</sup>

According to the West Tennessee Historical Society Papers and the Commercial Appeal, a number of political leaders and prominent businessmen were assigned to visit the

Secretary of War, Mr. Newton Baker and Brigadier General George O. Squier, Chief Signal Corps Officer. Their goal was to persuade the Army to inspect the Memphis area for possible aviation field sites. This occurred on or about June 12, 1917. An Army representative familiar with airfield specifications was sent to the area in late June to examine the proposed sites.<sup>9,10</sup>

Sites in Millington and Woodstock were eventually determined to be suitable and ultimately, the Millington site was chosen.<sup>11</sup> It was within on half mile of the Illinois Central Railroad, was reasonably flat, and had good water.<sup>2</sup> It was also within 20 miles of Memphis and its ready supply of labor. Land agreements were quickly negotiated. A lease was signed by the government and on August 28, 1917 a resolution was passed clearing the way for construction to begin on the field.<sup>12</sup>

Several unusual events followed. Memphis political leaders, and Memphis Chamber of Commerce members immediately realized the business opportunity from the construction contracts alone and dispatched representatives to inform the Army they were ready and willing to build whatever was needed for the new base.<sup>12</sup>

The construction contract was awarded to the Harmon Company of St. Louis. Memphis business leaders and the Chamber were incredulous.<sup>13</sup>

*“ No one was more surprised than Senator McKellar who, believing the Harmon firm was a Memphis [co.] one, had given Mr. Harmon a letter of introduction to*

*the Army. As a result, the Army, believing this to be an endorsement by Senator McKellar, approved the awarding of the contract to the Harmon Company. Relative to this matter, Captain Edgar, who had inspected the Millington site prior to its selection, sent a letter to Senator McKellar in which he stated, "This company was chosen upon recommendations by you." In answering Edgar's letter, Senator McKellar replied: " This statement is an absolute, unqualified and unmitigated falsehood."*

Except from Tennessee Historical Papers  
Written by Mr. John Norris  
Park Field – WWI Pilot Training Field, p.63

This would not be last of the political wrangling over the construction contracts at Park Field. Ultimately, the contract was stripped from the Harmon company and awarded to E. A. Wickham Company of Omaha Nebraska.<sup>14</sup> Although all sub-contracts were honored, no Memphis firms were involved in a leadership role.<sup>14</sup> Fighting over the award of construction contracts brought work to a halt for 6 days in early September. When work resumed, more than 2,080 men were working on the site. Materials were hauled by mule and wagon until the 4,000-foot spur of the Illinois Central Railroad was completed.<sup>15</sup>

Work proceeded uninterrupted simultaneously constructing hangars, living quarters, administration buildings, machine shops and even an officers club. Concurrently, construction of an artesian well, a water treatment facility, a steam and electricity generating facility, sewage treatment, draining systems and utility distribution was undertaken. When construction was completed, the base in Millington was virtually self

contained and self-supporting. Early October 1917, The Secretary of War, Mr. Newton Baker approved the name Park Field.<sup>16</sup>

Major Earl J. Canady was appointed commandant and three hundred enlisted men were ordered to the school from Kelly Field in San Antonio Texas.<sup>17</sup> October 26, 1917 the school was officially opened, even though construction was still not completed. On November 30, 1917, thirty students arrived from the University of Illinois followed by another seventy-five from Princeton University.<sup>18</sup> All had received ground school training and learned the fundamentals of flight at their respective universities.<sup>19</sup> Included in the ground school phase were related aviation subjects, weapons and classes on aircraft engines performance and maintenance.<sup>20</sup>

The primary trainer, the JN-4 Jenny had a 20 knot difference between cruise speed and stall speed. This made the Jenny slightly overpowered in ratio to its weight and therefore quite forgiving of student mistakes. With a cruising speed of 60 mph and a top speed of 80+ mph, it was also one of the fastest production aircraft built. The Jenny could climb to 11,000 feet in altitude, had a good range and particularly good handling characteristics.<sup>21</sup>

Overhaul intervals were generally less than 100 hours between rebuilds. The Jenny was wood framed, covered in fabric and was powered by the Curtis OX-5 V-8 gas engine rated at 90 horsepower. The cost for a Jenny was a little over \$5,000 per copy.<sup>22</sup>

Instrumentation for the student consisted of an altimeter, an ignition switch, and a light switch. More than 5,000 were purchased before the Armistice was signed in 1918.



JN-2 “Jenny” With Typical Army Air Corps Insignia

Student training progressed rapidly. One fledgling aviator recounted his experience:

*“May 4 Saturday. I soloed this morning at 09:30 – Made four fine trips alone around the field. Had 6 hrs and 27 min of instruction, Hurray for Billy Brock.”*

West Tennessee Historical Society Papers  
Author: John Norris. p.67

Pilot training lasted 6-8 weeks with students receiving between 40 and 50 hours of flight time in the JN-4.<sup>23</sup> Since the Jenny was primarily a daytime fair weather type of training aircraft, student pilots also helped assemble airplanes that were shipped in crates by rail.

They practiced firing machine guns and frequently attended military instruction classes. A few even stood Kitchen Police duty.<sup>24</sup>

The winter of 1917-1918 was one of the harshest on record with sub-zero temperatures and snow. The Mississippi River froze solid on the surface and flight operations were greatly curtailed.<sup>25</sup> However, in February 1918, Park field set a record for flying 252 hours in just one day. “This was even more remarkable because the field was still under construction and conditions at he base were considered, “Worst in the United States” by a visiting officer.<sup>26</sup>

By March, there were more than 100 aircraft at Park field with flight hours between 200-300 hours/day. Park Field was one of the most active aviation training sites in the United States, less than 9 months after the construction began.<sup>27</sup> Training continued uninterrupted until November 11, 1918 when the Armistice was signed. On November 12, Park Field was ordered to cease flight-training operations until further notice and to grant leave to all students.<sup>28</sup>

During this time, Park Field was used as to pioneer Air Mail routes north, south and west of the field. The fate of Park Field was even more uncertain than the daring young pilots who pioneered the early routes. After all, the field was only leased at this point. Local Government, business and community leaders wanted the War Department to purchase the land and declare Park Field a permanent training facility. This was agreed upon March 29 that the government would exercise the purchase clause of the original lease

agreement.<sup>29</sup> It was a euphoric time for Memphis and Millington residents believing their long-term dream of an Army cantonment in the local area had finally come true. It was short lived. On April 1, 1919, Park Field was ordered closed. One delay in the purchase followed another. It would not be until March 23, 1920 that the field was purchased for the sum of \$88,010.50. To that date the government had paid \$2,097,000 since the inception of the lease in August of 1917.<sup>30, 31</sup>

Training declined rapidly after the Armistice was signed and by 1922, Park Field was little more than a storage area for aircraft and parts. Most of the planes were sold to the public for fifty dollars and spare engine for twenty-five.<sup>32</sup> In 1923, the remaining aircraft had their tires and engines removed and the frames were burned.<sup>33</sup> Demolition began on Park Field shortly thereafter. In about the same amount of time it took to build the field, it was demolished and the land was returned to agricultural uses. Although commercial aviation sporadically continued in and around the airfield, by 1925, all military presence in Millington was gone.<sup>34</sup>

It would take the great stock market crash of 1929 to breath some life back into Park Field. In the early 1930s, Park Field was used as transient camp for unemployed workers during the great depression. Attempts were made to raise cattle on the government land to feed poor people in the local area as a tent city housed those who had reached the end of their road. Resettlement with small agrarian forays would continue until 1937 when model farms were managed to teach new farming techniques . The Resettlement Administration would manage the land until December 8, 1941.<sup>35</sup>

## The Middle

Part II of the history of Naval Support Activity began the morning following the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Then, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox ordered the preliminary work on establishing a naval presence in the Memphis area. His reasoning was sound.

Establishing an inland airfield, thought to be safe from coastal assaults much like the surprise attack at Pearl Harbor, a central location, good rail and transportation support and the government already owned about 910 acres on the site.<sup>36</sup>

On February 25, 1942, the Navy Shore Station Development Board recommended the approval of a new Naval Reserve Aviation Base in Millington. Just over a month later the first sailor, a Chief Yeoman, arrived in Millington. Finding no one else to report to, he reported to a civilian Mr. Allen Morgan who was as lost as the chief. Mr. Morgan was awaiting commissioning and anticipating orders to report to duty in Millington. It is a little ironic that the first man to report to Millington after WWII had begun was an enlisted man and that his arrival was only noted by a civilian. Sailors are notoriously superstitious, and this might not be a good sign.<sup>37</sup>

On April 17, 1942, the U.S. Government obtained a federal court order for the possession of 2,179.48 acres of land near Millington for the site of a new five million dollar Naval Reserve Aviation Base. Federal Judge Marion S. Boyd rendered judgment on the declaration of taking the land. By April 27, 1942, the land was delivered to the

government for the price of \$203,601 divided amongst eighteen landowners. On June 17, 1942, the ground breaking began.<sup>38</sup>

The earliest interpretation of aerial photos showed a systematic if somewhat dramatic transformation of the area. Virtually every single acre of land was bulldozed flat, all trees were cut and the stumps grubbed or blasted from the ground, and a nearly 3,000 acre construction site was established. Simultaneously, construction on a Naval Hospital was begun on more than 340 acres now occupied by the University of Memphis and the Federal Prison Camp Millington. Also added to the original contract was the construction of Naval Training Station, located adjacent to the original Park Field and south of Millington Arlington Road.<sup>39</sup>

Lieutenant Commander R.P. Carlson, Civil Engineering Corps, United States Navy was the designated Officer in Charge of Construction. The development and construction was believed to be the largest of its kind east of the Mississippi River.<sup>39</sup>

Mr. Carlson oversaw the construction of suitable living quarters for the enlisted men under his charge, their messing, billeting and meeting their immediate needs.

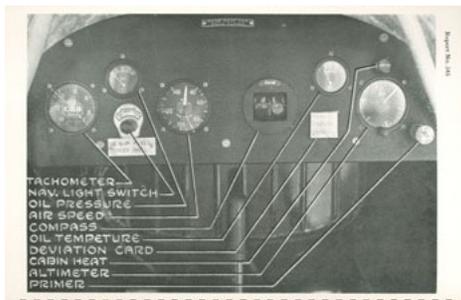
Simultaneously work occurred on electric distribution, steam distribution from three separate steam plants, water treatment facilities, sewer and storm water drainage, sewage treatment facilities, laundry, dry cleaning, recreation buildings, swimming pools, administration, a brig, all roads and sidewalks, telephone systems, theaters and medical facilities. At one point, more than 300 buildings were under construction at any given

time. Gantt charts could not have covered this type of construction activity. Temporary headquarters facilities were established in the Shelby County Court House and later the Dermon Building in downtown Memphis until living quarters and office spaces were erected on site in Millington.<sup>40</sup>

By June 13, 1942, two aircraft had arrived in Memphis for use by the aviators of the group, an NE1 “Grasshopper” and an N3N-3 “Yellow Peril.”<sup>39</sup> Although the Grasshopper was originally an Army and later Air Force forward observation aircraft, it was also an excellent pilot trainer, with simple controls and a very good “feel.” The NE1 was the navy version of the L-4 liaison aircraft, originally designated the O-59. Produced by the Piper Aircraft Company, it was the military version of the famous Piper J3 “Cub.”<sup>41</sup>

The Army ordered the first O-59s in 1941 for tests in conjunction with its growing interest in the use of light aircraft for liaison and observation duties in direct support of ground forces. Between 1941 and 1945, the Army procured almost 6,000 Piper Aircraft. The Navy found the Piper to be a forgiving and low cost primary flight trainer with the military versions costing less than \$2,500 each.<sup>42</sup>

### Cockpit Instrumentation for the Grasshopper<sup>42</sup>



### Checklist for Grasshopper<sup>42</sup>





Piper L-4A also designated as the Navy NE1, Both designations were affectionately known as the “Grasshopper.”<sup>43</sup>



Army Air Corps L-4 “Grasshopper” Forward Observation aircraft and Pilot Trainer<sup>43</sup>

In June 1939, there were only 1,248 active Navy and Marine Corps aviators in the United States. Yet between 1941 and 1945, the U.S. Navy trained nearly 65,000 pilots. The vast majority of these pilots had no prior flight experience and many had never even seen the inside of an aircraft cockpit. Before these novices could master the skills required to fly high performance fighters or land on a pitching carrier deck they had to gain experience

on a variety of small, easily-produced relatively docile, but capable basic trainers. Thrust into the air for the first time, and with instructors, determined to wash-out all but the best students, constantly looking over their shoulders (literally), the students quickly identified these brightly painted aircraft as the "Yellow Peril." While other primary biplane trainers carried this nickname unofficially, the Naval Aircraft Factory N3N wore it as its semi-official title. <sup>44</sup> The second aircraft to arrive at the Reserve Air Base in Millington was an N3N-3 "Yellow Peril." <sup>45</sup>

Thousands more would cycle through the base over the next 20 years with the last N3N-3 decommissioning in 1962. Pictures below show last active Navy Yellow Peril aircraft in the National Naval Aviation Museum in Pensacola Fl.



N3N-3 Yellow Peril Sea Plane Version in the National Museum of Naval Aviation, Pensacola, Florida<sup>45</sup>



Land Version of the N3N-3 Yellow Peril, Western Aerospace Museum<sup>47</sup>

Just a little over 8 months after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and less than 7 months after the order was signed creating the base, the Naval Reserve Aviation Base was officially commissioned with the Lieutenant Commander Walter G. Green, USN, a Naval Aviator as commanding Officer. The date was September 15, 1942.<sup>48</sup>

On September 23, 1942, the Naval Training Station (Aviation Maintenance) was officially commissioned with Lieutenant Commander Leonard Kirby commanding.<sup>48</sup>

Both separate bases had their own staff officers, supply, public works shops, medical, dental, and payroll offices. During this same period construction neared completion of the Naval Hospital located east of the Naval Reserve Airbase and the Naval Training Station.

The Hospital, although not yet completed would have a long history of support to the veterans returning from WWII, Korea and later Viet Nam. It became the policy of the Department of War and later, the Department of Defense, to send returning veterans to the hospital of their choice for treatment, rehabilitation and processing. In almost every instance, soldiers, sailors and marines chose the military hospital closest to home. The original Naval Hospital Millington served in this capacity until 1972 when the newer and more modern 6-story, 220,000 square foot Naval Hospital was constructed.

Although no firm number could be found in historic documentation, it would be safe to say that many thousands of wounded veterans transited this facility upon return from the war efforts on three continents.

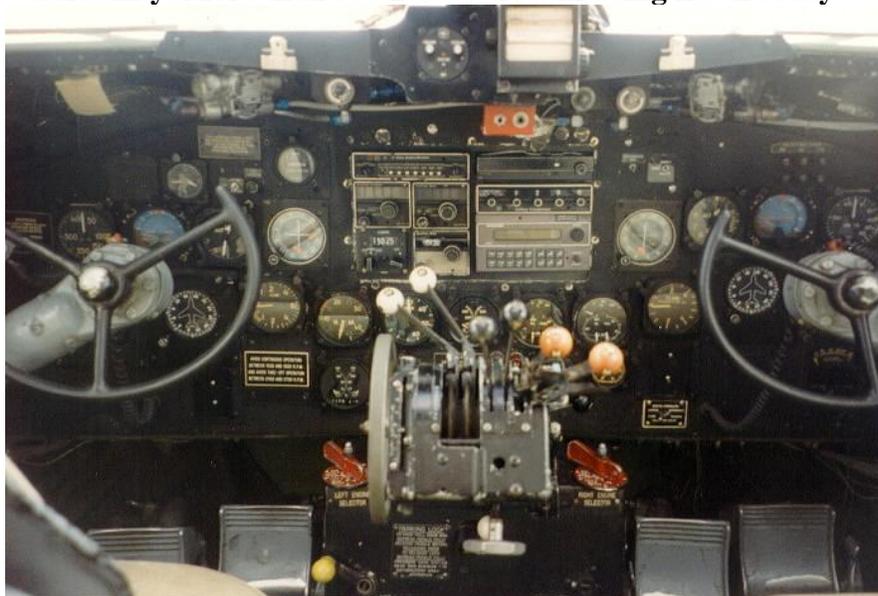
By December of 1942, all three bases were actively performing their assigned missions. On December 4<sup>th</sup>, the first edition of the BlueJacket, still in print today, was published by the Naval Training School. Between this time and May 8, 1945 thousands of students attended aviation schools in Millington. During peak periods upwards of 7,000 students were in daily training while others performed functions to support operations. Many of these worked in the galley, policed the grounds, worked to augment various administrative functions, assembled or repaired aircraft or performed lifeguard duties.

The Reserve Air Base was cycling students through at a fevered pace to meet the demands for fighter and bomber aircraft pilots in the Pacific theater and Europe. Many different type of aircraft were stationed and flown off the new runways at the airbase

including C-118s Liftmasters, DC-3s (R4D) Goonie Birds, A-4 “Scooters” or “Skyhawks, TBMs, T-6 Texans and later T-34s.



**This aircraft -flew out of NAS Memphis until returning to Jacksonville in August of 1955. It is a Douglas DC-3 with the Navy Designator R4D-6S Bu.No 50783. Affectionately nicknamed the Goonie Bird. The “Confederate Air Force” is still flying it today. It flew actively for more than 35 years, a tribute to the design and durability. More than 300 DC-3s are still being flown today.<sup>49</sup>**



**“Modern” Cockpit Control Suite of the R4-D, Goonie Bird<sup>49</sup>**



**R4D-6S Bu.No 50783 on flight line, unidentified location.**<sup>49</sup>



First flown on 1 August 1941, the three-seat Grumman *TBF-1* Avenger torpedo-bomber entered US Navy service just in time to participate in the Battle of Midway in June 1942. During its World War II lifespan, the Avenger design changed very little, and this allowed it to be built in huge quantities. Demand for the airplane was so great that the General Motors Company was also contracted to build it, under the designation *TBM-1*,

beginning in September 1942.<sup>50</sup> Archive photos indicate that the Aviation Machinist Machinists (Mechanic) A school used the TBM-1 engines for training students until the early 1960s. Several file photos depict the TBM-1 Parked on the flight line at the Naval Reserve Airbase during the early 1940s and up to 1956.



U.S Navy pilot flew the airplane extensively, under the *SNJ* designation, the most common of these being the *SNJ-4*, *SNJ-5* and *SNJ-6*.<sup>51</sup>

The North American T-6 Texan was known as "the pilot maker" because of its important role in preparing pilots for combat. Derived from the 1935 North American NA-16 prototype, a cantilever low-wing monoplane, the Texan filled the need for a basic combat trainer during WW II and beyond. The original order of 94 AT-6 Texans differed little

from subsequent versions such as the AT-6A (1,847) which revised the fuel tanks or the AT-6D (4,388) and AT-6F (956) that strengthened as well as lightened the frame with the use of light alloys. In all, more than 17,000 airframes were designed to the Texan standards.<sup>51</sup>



**T-34B Mentor, Flight line location unknown. Became the primary flight trainer in the mid 1950s.<sup>52</sup>**

On February 6, 1943, the name of the Naval Training School was changed to the Naval Air Technical Training Center or NATTC. It would retain this designation and title until it was moved to Pensacola Fl, almost 55 years later. In March of the same year, the 600

bed Naval Hospital was officially commissioned even though it had been serving patients for more than 2 years and already had more than 350 patients onboard. Capt E.L. McDermott, Medical Corps, USN commanded.<sup>53</sup>

The bases in Millington continued to grow. During 1943, the gymnasium, designated N-82 was completed. The laminated wood truss building could host five basketball games and two volleyball games simultaneously, but was not originally designed for that purpose. It was in fact constructed as a drill hall. Through the years a common misconception was that the building was originally designed as a hangar, because aircraft were stored there during high winds and inclement weather. It also resembles the zeppelin hangars designed for lighter than air airships found in Lakehurst New Jersey and Moffett Field Ca, although smaller in scale. The N-82 gymnasium is still in use today having undergone a 4-year renovation to replace the roofs, saunas, locker rooms, administrative offices and floor. For years, it has been used for roller-skating, Navy-wide sporting events and tournaments, and continues to serve as the primary gym for Naval Support Activity Mid-South.

Adjacent to the drill hall, an indoor pool was constructed and designated as building N-79. The pool, heated and the building climate controlled was believed to be the “Largest in the World” at the time of its construction. The primary purpose was to train pilots and aircrewmembers in water survival skills and swimming. Trussed walkways were suspended from the wooden post and beam construction and were patrolled by civilian and military lifeguards. The indoor pool would remain in constant service for more than 55 years and

was demolished in the mid 90s. Thousands of aviators and aircrew candidates received instruction in this facility, which was an innovation in its time.

In October 1943, the undersecretary of the Navy James V. Forrestal inspected the Memphis commands. At that time, there were more than 10 recreation buildings, 7 dispensaries, quarters for Wave Officers and Enlisted, and as of July, there were separate quarters for the first black sailors. By this time, there were clubs established for Chief Petty Officer, Petty Officers, and Marine NCOs. Operations would proceed relatively unchanged until 1945.<sup>53</sup>

On December 8, 1945, Victory in Europe was declared. However, the war in the Pacific was still raging against Japan. Pilot training and aviation support personnel needed to maintain the increasing complex aircraft systems was at a peak. August 5, 1945 marked Victory over Japan and essentially ended the “War to end all Wars.” This would end the era of Primary Pilot Training in Millington although it would not be until July 1, 1945. The designation as the Naval Air Primary Training Command was discarded and the airfield was redesignated as Naval Reserve Air Base. Although this was the correct title, archives refer to the station in Millington as Naval Air Station Memphis, Naval Air Reserve Station Memphis and Naval Reserve Air Station Memphis.

The Mission was shifted to training Naval and Marine Reserve Personnel. The mission for NATTC remained virtually unchanged even though the Navy had begun transition to several different model aircraft. The Naval Hospital mission remained

unchanged as well. Three separate bases still operated under three different commanding officers. A large portion of the Naval Hospital complex would be converted to other uses.

In July of 1946, the Chief of Naval Air Technical Training was established with headquarters in Memphis and was subordinate to the Naval Air Technical Training Command headquartered in Pensacola Florida. By September, Rear Admiral Felix B. Sump had transferred his staff from Pensacola and CNTECTRA headquarters assumed its duties at the base in Millington. CNTECTRA would remain in Millington for the next 50 years, until it was decommissioned in 1995. The Chief of Naval Technical Training became the fourth largest command in Millington.<sup>53</sup>

In 1947, an aggressive revitalization project was undertaken to improve the facilities at NATTC. One hundred eighty-five public living quarters were constructed for officers and apartments for forty-four enlisted families.<sup>54</sup> The Bachelor Officer Quarters and the Women's Officer Quarters were altered to accommodate 30 officer families. By the end of the following year, NATTC Personnel numbered about 9,000, and would remain at these levels for the next 50 years.

The Chief of Naval Technical Training originally presided in buildings now known as the East Command. The headquarters was located adjacent to the Navy Hospital at the extreme eastern boundaries of the Navy property. They would reside there until a newer more modern building was constructed in the early 1980s. At that time, the headquarters was moved into building C-1, one of the very first private partnership ventures in the

Navy. It was an idea well ahead of the times. A building was built by a private third party who obtained financing and paid for construction. The building was constructed on Navy property, in fact, on the site of the “old Commissary.” The Navy then agreed to lease the facility for 25 years at a pre-determined rate. At the expiration of the agreement, the Navy owns the facility outright. Today, the Navy is exploring PPV for Housing and other construction projects around the world. After the Base Realignment and Closure Commission (BRAC) '93 ordered NATTC moved to Pensacola, CNTECHTRA was disestablished replaced for a short time by Commander Naval Activities Mid-South.<sup>56</sup>

The four major commands that existed onboard the Naval property in Millington each provided their own logistics support and remained fully autonomous until 1949. On April 1, 1949, the Naval Reserve Air Base became the Naval Air Reserve Training Unit or NARTU and the new Naval Air Station Memphis was established. This is significant because the it was at this time that NAS Memphis assumed all logistics support for the NARTU, CNTECHTRA and NATTC. Prior to this, NATTC provided support to the CNTECHTRA Staff, the Naval Reserve Air Base was self supporting and the Naval Hospital supported itself independently.<sup>56</sup>

This essentially designated the NAS as the “landlord” for all tenants including the minor commands not mentioned in this report. NATTC then had the sole mission of technical training while NAS provided all logistic and facility support. This relationship would survive for more than 50 years. The Naval Hospital continued to perform it’s own support including the ownership of land, with NAS supporting when required. NAS Supplied

Medical, Dental, Disbursing, Public Works, and supply functions for all tenant commands. Most of the support personnel from NATTC and CNTECTRA were transferred to the NAS Staff. <sup>56</sup>

Ironically, the first Commanding Officer for NAS Memphis served just 11 days. Commander W.A. Stuart reported on April 1, 1949 and was relieved on 11 April 1949 by the Official Commanding Officer, Captain John V. Peterson. <sup>56</sup>

On August 9, 1951, an official ground breaking ceremony was held for a \$64,000,000 permanent building program. New training facilities were to be constructed for NATTC, new barracks, a new galley and a new central warehouse facility. Building S-236, a new public works facility was constructed first. Building S-237 along with two modern open bay barracks designated S-238 and S-239 were also constructed. Building S-240, would be the first of the “modern” aviation training schools with S-241 immediately following. The new facilities were air conditioned, had good lighting and ventilation, and properly sized restroom facilities. <sup>56</sup>

In December of 1953, a \$4,458, 000 project completed buildings S-237, S-238 and S-239. The three formed a connected complex served by yet another boiler system and represented the first “modernization” efforts to replace aging barracks structures. The barracks were brick masonry construction with reinforced concrete pillars and beams, with two story 10,000 square foot dormitories in 10 separate wings. Although these

buildings were barracks, they were built to last. All three are still in use today housing the public safety department and various small tenants.<sup>57</sup>

Immediately following was the construction of more barracks. These would be of 4 story design, again pillar and reinforced beam construction, and built to last. They housed students for over 40 years and were demolished in the very late 1990s with the last buildings torn down in 2001. The last to be torn down was ironically the barracks that was used to house "Restricted Personnel."<sup>56</sup>

On September 4, 1952, the eight thousand foot runway was opened and is in fact still in use today. Prior to that, the longest runway available was just under 5,000 ft. During the excavation and civil engineering project to extend the runway, the third of the Navy Lakes was dug in order to provide fill dirt for the runway. When the lake was flooded, Kerville Rosemark Road was bisected and remains the same today.<sup>58</sup>

In August of 1953, the Naval Air Station was designated as an All-Weather station by the CNO, even though it had actively provided Ground Controlled Approach (GCA) radar services for more than 3 years. For the next several years, the Naval Air Station remained mostly unchanged both in form and function.<sup>56</sup>

In 1959, command history documents stated the following,:

"The Naval Air Station in 1959 has an allowance of approximately 1,350 enlisted men, women and officer. About 13,000 officers, wives and men are stationed at NAS and tenant activities. The total population of Navy Memphis, including civilian employees is about 15,500."

## **The Later Years**

Over the next twenty years, the Naval Air Station Memphis performed its support mission with aplomb. In the early 1970s, yet another major permanent building construction effort was undertaken with virtually every wood-framed WWII era barracks building replaced by modern brick masonry structures according to current property records and P-164 documentation.

About this time, in 1972, a new modern Naval Hospital was constructed on 38 acres of land west of Casper Creek. Eight support buildings were also constructed including a women's barracks, a recreation center, a pool, bath house, pump house, an emergency generator building and utility outbuildings. A Bureau of Medicine decision, separate from BRAC ordered the hospital closed in 1995. The building was declared excess through the General Service Administration and transferred to the University of Memphis in December 2001.

Excesses wood framed buildings were demolished or adapted to other uses with a couple of notable exceptions. Until 1985, the Brig and the Correctional Custody Unit, and the Headquarters building S-1, remained in service. In 1985, a \$5.8 million brig was built on the northside of the base adjacent to the N-82 gym. At the time of construction it was a state of the art facility and was almost completely self contained. One might surmise that this was the Navy way of doing business. It would be closed as a result of the BRAC 93 decision to move NATTC to Pensacola.

The Brig, building 796, had a galley, library, chaplains office, barber-shop, laundry, segregated cells for both male and female detainees, and even a sally-port for detainee induction. A separate correctional custody unit was maintained complete with classroom space for military instruction and church services. A central control room could lock or unlock any door on the facility, with every space monitored by closed circuit television cameras. An exercise yard, carpenter shop and janitors facility were also included. The brig would serve until 1995 when it was permanently closed and ultimately transferred to the City of Millington. In 2004, the Millington Police Department and Jail were relocated to the newly renovated facility and expansion is underway to construct courtroom facilities.

By the mid-1980s, virtually all Naval Air Technical Training was operating out of new, or newly renovated facilities. A modern fire-fighting school was constructed to simulate carrier deck operations. Mock aircraft were burned over and over again to train fledgling firefighters in real life conditions including wind machines and smoke generators.

Building S-1 would serve as the Headquarters for NAS Memphis until 1998, when the Commanding Officer relocated to BLD 455, where he remains today. In 2000, bld S-1 was demolished, one of the last woodframe occupied buildings on the Naval Support Activity Mid-South. Photographic Historic Preservation exists and original Bureau of Yards and Docks drawings have been preserved.

Throughout the remainder of VietNam and up until 1975, the Navy trained almost every aviation rating in Millington. Thousands of Jet Mechanics, Support Equipment mechanics, Electronics Technicians, Antisubmarine Warfare Operators, Parachute Riggers, Aviation Support Equipment Technicians, Aviation Structural Mechanics for Hydraulics and Sheet Metal, Aviation Boatswains Mates and Trademen all went through schools in Millington.

Upgrades to facilities, buildings, housing and schools continue through the 80s. Notable construction included the construction of 6 permanent school buildings housing Aviation Electronics, Aviation Machinist Mates, Aviation Support Equipment, Aviation Structural Mechanics and Aviation Survival Equipment including Parachute Riggers. At the height of training instruction at NATTC and NAS, steady student population averaged more than 7,000 students and more than 2,000 instructors, civilians and contractors.

Conditions and facilities in 1993 would take an abrupt change. When the Base Realignment and Closure Commission recommended, and later became law, the aviation training component was directed to move to Pensacola. It was believed at that time, constructing training facilities at the Naval Air Station Pensacola for the move, would cost less than \$550 million and consolidate pilot primary training and all aviation training in one command. This would in essence, eliminate approximately 10,000 jobs in the Millington area. The community was outraged. The loss of salaries would approach \$200 million per year, a staggering sum for a community of about 17,000 residents, including those that resided in base housing.

Included in the BRAC '93 decision was the relocation of the Bureau of Personnel, including a 2 –Star Admiral from the Washington D.C. area, to NAS Memphis and the addition of more than 4,000 higher paying jobs. After the numbers were washed, it was determined that the loss of salaries and contractual business would actually become a net gain for the community.

More than four years were required for the transition from an active Naval Air Station to the new mission of the Naval Support Activity. Suddenly, more than 40 barracks buildings lay vacant and dozens of WWII era support facilities no longer had a mission. At the time of the BRAC '93 report, there were 9 restaurants on base, ironically 12 lounges, a 36 lane bowling alley, an indoor pool, three outdoor pools, 5 barber shops and many more miscellaneous recreational facilities. The vast majority were no longer needed and could not be supported after the demographic changes were completed. Much to the chagrin of the permanent party personnel that remained on the base, facilities started to close.

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The telephone center, southside mini-mart, pool halls, bowling alley, restaurants, ice cream parlor, and wood working shop were all closed as the student population dwindled. By mid-year, 1997 and throughout most of 1998, Naval Air Station Memphis was virtually deserted.

The Fleet Logistics Squadron (Reserve) VR-60 was transferred to Carswell Air Force Base outside of Dallas as well as the Marine Air Group 40, and Patrol Squadron Sixty-Seven. The Air Operations Department, once with more than 300 people assigned was reduced to a skeleton crew whose job it was to prepare the airfield for turnover to the City of Millington. Meanwhile the Brig was closed and all equipment was prepped for transfer as well. More than 1329 acres of land surrounding the airfield and the brig would ultimately be transferred to city, the industrial board and municipal airport.

In October 1994, the first of the BUPERS staff began to arrive. Pers 6 and Pers 65 established the Morale Welfare and Recreation staff presence in Millington. After a multi-million dollar renovation of buildings 457 and 458, Pers 6 opened for business along with the Navy Motion Picture Service. Pers 6 performs programs management for the entire navy including all Non-Appropriated Fund employees, worldwide.

Subsequently, in March of 1995, the Navy Manpower and Analysis Center NAVMAC arrived in Millington and occupied building C-1 mentioned earlier as the former headquarters for CNTECTRA. The mission of NAVMAC was to determine the correct manning for each activity within the navy. For instance, how many gunners-mates for a destroyer, guided missile frigate or a harbor tug. How many Air Traffic Controllers for a carrier, helicopter landing ship or landing ship dock? It was a tough mission then, it is still tough today.

All this was occurring as the BRAC '95 commission was nearing completion. Frankly, sailors and civilians from the Millington community were already scared. However, BRAC '95 would infuse new life into Millington yet again. BRAC '95 ordered the Commander, Navy Recruiting Command to relocate to Millington. CNRC would occupy one of the more modern facilities after a quick face lift. Also within the BRAC '95 directives, the Naval Personnel Research and Development Center would relocate from San Diego and occupy one of the four remaining modern permanent school house buildings. In an unrelated action, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Finance Center decided to consolidate more than 60 offices worldwide into building 787 and has been onboard ever since. Although several building would remain unoccupied for some years, ultimately it would be the U.S. Army Reserve that would fill those spaces.

In 1997, the Naval Hospital Millington closed it's doors for the last time. Gone from Millington, for the first time since WWII began, was inpatient care. The six story hospital had a full operating suite with several surgical units, a full maternity ward and delivery rooms, an alcohol rehabilitation unit, a psychiatric unit, dental surgery, orthopedic, ophthalmology and optometry clinics, X-ray, family practice, a full pharmacy and immunization clinics. Naval Hospital Millington had been opened in 1972 and closed almost 25 years later. This was a Bureau of Medicine decision and unrelated to BRAC. As a result, even more personnel left Millington.

On October 1, 1998, the designation as a Naval Air Station was changed forever. The Naval Air Station Memphis became the Naval Support Activity Memphis. More than

fifty-five years of aviation training and history closed that day. Thence forward, the mission of the base was to provide tenant support to commands that were now onboard.

By 1999, there were more than 30 tenant commands onboard, providing local and worldwide functions. Although the vast majority were and are administrative commands, their duties affect sailors and marines worldwide. For instance, the Bureau of Personnel writes orders for every sailor in the Navy. They manage the budget that pays for PCS moves when orders are written. That's every rating or job specialty in the Navy including assignment to the War Colleges, Language Schools and joint commands.

BUPERS manages the support functions for sailors as well including the chaplains, the fleet and family support centers, and even manages child advocacy and spousal support programs.

CNRC is responsible for the Navy Career Recruiting force worldwide. They determine not only how many sailors that need to be recruited, but how many recruiters it will take to do it. They look at the reasons sailors re-enlist and why sailors chose to terminate their careers. They pay for advertising, posters, commercials, and even the Navy Stock Car team. They perform promotions worldwide and ensure that the infusion of young and able bodied recruits remains at planned levels. They make the policy on who can join, what the requirements are and should be, and who will be turned away.

The Navy Personnel Research and Development Center also relocated to Millington. Their mission is to determine what makes sailors stay or go. What commercials are effective. Through surveys and analysis, they determine what is important for the policy makers to address and their work touches the very fabric of the Navy. Although the vast majority of the employees are civilian, they are no less important to the Navy than the guys and gals who fuel airplanes on a carrier deck off the coast of Iraq.

In December of 1999, the land, buildings, and all accoutrements associated with the airfield, industrial park and brig were formally transferred . In a ceremony held in hangar N-7, visiting dignitaries from Washington, Nashville and most of the surrounding municipalities witnessed the handover of the deeds to the new owners. Truly, at this point, the face of Naval Support Activity was changed forever. The Naval Support Activity, once more than 3,600 acres now totaled less than 1,400. The 100 acres at the old Naval Hospital site was transferred to the Bureau of Prisons. The 38 acres of land formerly the site of the new Naval Hospital was transferred to the University of Memphis for a North Shelby Campus. Subsequently, the land that made up the Navy Lakes Recreation Area and the Lazy Anchor Riding Academy were leased back to the government for maintenance and upkeep. The two leases total approximately 380 acres and are destined to become light industrial development up lease termination.

For the next five years, the majority of the action at the Naval Support Activity became demolition instead of construction. Since 1996, the Naval Air Station and the Naval Support Activity Mid-South have demolished almost 2.2 million square feet of excess

facilities. Housing, old school buildings, barracks and recreational facilities make up the vast majority. Critics have claimed the demolition is destroying the heritage of the area but the claim is indefensible when factors for maintenance, upkeep and utilities are factored in. It is estimated the demolition alone saves almost \$6 million per year. Since 1999 the face of the Naval Support Activity has been little changed, a slow but positive change has occurred. Growth in Bureau of Personnel and CNRC have been steadily on the positive side.

As Naval Support Activity Mid-South completes its first five years of the new century, the fate of the base still remains somewhat uncertain. BRAC '05 is currently underway which causes yet more anxiety in the community, both military and civilian. Although it seems uncertain that NSA will be on a closure list, it could very possibly encounter another realignment much like BRAC '93 and '95 directed.

There are however, some mitigating circumstances that were not present or considered during the first several rounds of base closures. The Naval Support Activity, its land and accoutrements have never been in better condition. The buildings are mechanically sound and most meet stringent life-safety, earthquake and American with Disabilities Act standards. The decision-makers at Naval Support Activity have arduously pursued re-capitalization standards and have produced a facility that is not only in great condition, but is the right size to meet its current mission. So much so in fact, that several prospective tenants have expressed an interest in not only moving to Naval Support Activity, but expanding operations. Today, the base barely resembles the structure or

composition of the original Park Field, or even the Naval Reserve Air Base which gave birth to the military presence after both World Wars. One can only speculate on the future, but it is my opinion that the Naval Support Activity, will only grow and rise to heights as we continue into the 2005 and beyond.



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