Pilots recall 'Navy days' in Santa Rosa

The old Santa Rosa Naval Air Station, built for World War II, re-commissioned for the Korean conflict, has passed over to the private sector. Its runways will be closed to all air traffic as of March 1. There will probably be houses built where the Navy's Corsairs and Helldivers once dwelt.

Private pilots, who have used the former military base as a casual airstrip for 40 years, have planned a fly-in next weekend, as a way to say goodbye and to re-tell the old stories of the airport's glorious past.

The Navy airfield's past is a mite glorious. From 1943 through '45 it was home base to Carrier Aircraft Service Unit (CASU) 36, Naval Air, USN, and a training base to some 18 squadrons (eight bombing squadrons, five torpedo squadrons, three fighter squadrons and two squadrons of Marines) bound for aircraft carrier duty in the Pacific Theater.

They flew Douglas Dauntlesses, Curtiss Helldivers, Grumann Avengers and, late in the war, Grumann Hellcats, Bearcats and the night fighting Tigercats. In '51 and '52, on their way to the waters off Korea, they flew Skyraiders and Grumann Panthers along with the Corsairs, bringing Santa Rosa into the jet age.

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THE NAVY fliers kept the skies over the North Bay "interesting" in their time here. The 14,000-foot X-shaped runways stretched from close to Sebastopol Road on the north all the way to Ludwig Avenue on the south and from Stony Point Road west to South Wright Road.

There was a rock in the Pacific, just off Goat Rock, with a white circle painted on it that served as a practice target for the dive bombers.

For sport, the fighter pilots engaged the P-38s and 39s flown by Army Air Corps pilots from the Santa Rosa Army Airfield north of town (now the county airport) in impromptu dogfights over the hopfields and orchards that lay between the two bases.

In their off-hours they ate spaghetti (and drank) at Lena's, ate chow mein (and drank) at the Twin Dragons. They lived on the base or with their wives in converted garages and spare bedrooms of Santa Rosa homes. Some of the single ones married Santa Rosa girls and came back to stay at the end of the war. A significant number of them will be on hand next weekend, to share memories.

OFFICIALLY, it was the Santa Rosa Naval Auxiliary Air Station (SRNAAS), an outlying base in the military system run from the Alameda Naval Air Station. There were four other auxiliary bases to Alameda NAS built at the start of the war — Crow's Landing, Vernalis, Hollister and Arcata, described as the foggiest air field in the system.

Construction bids for the Santa Rosa facility were let in November of 1942. The base was commissioned in June of '43.

In turn, the Santa Rosa field had its own auxiliary, a landing strip with only minimum facilities, west of Highway 101 in Cotati. Original plans called for Cotati to be the major installation site, but that decision was reversed when military engineers found drainage problems on the Cotati land.

"I don't know what the official designation was," writes Jay Wright in his remembrance of Santa Rosa war duty, "we just called it 'Cotati.' It had no buildings and was a single paved strip marked off to indicate a carrier deck. Occasionally someone from the squadron would take some nags under his arm and drive over to serve as LSO on carrier landing practice."

Early in 1945 the command of the Santa Rosa station was expanded to include an emergency field at Little River in Mendocino County.

At the height of its WWII activity, Naval personnel at SRNAAS numbered about 1,800 men.

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MEN LIKE WRIGHT are great military history sources. The Naval Archives and the files of the Redwood Empire Aviation Historical Society can provide all the statistical information you'd want about the station, the size and type of hangars, the depth of the runway concrete, the numbers and insignias of the squadrons, the names of the personnel, military and civilian. But for earthbound Santa Rosans, the "people" stories, the memories are what count.

Wright, who lives in Chico now, was with CASU 36, the service unit. He arrived in August of 1944. "Santa Rosa was crowded," he recalled, "and housing for married couples was hard to find. There were two hotels (Santa Rosa and Occidental) and stays were limited to five days at each hotel. As we were about to get bounced out of the second hotel, an acquaintance at the base who had rented a bedroom in a private home prevailed on his landlady to take us in. We had a rollaway bed in the dining room and were glad to get it. The landlady took my wife around in her car, looking for a more permanent spot and we finally rented a sleeping porch in a fine old home. The problem was that the porch was not completely enclosed. I would come home from the base in the afternoon and find my wife in bed, wearing a heavy coat."

LT. JAMES HOSER'S daughter, Jane Maxwell, lives in Guerneville. She's taken a page or two from his squadron's yearbook to share some of the "wild times in the Santa Rosa skies!" when Hoser & company came to town.

"Upon arrival in Santa Rosa with new planes and no Modex numbers, the skipper remarked that 'if you are going to buzz anything, now is the time to do it,' and do it they did. The whole Santa Rosa Valley received a thorough going over. 'Pierre' Ferko led a flight over his home territory that brought disparaging remarks in the local gazette and, of course, poor recognition was responsible for the guilt falling on the Army P-39s.

"Married officers with their wives found the historic Russian River offered excellent living conditions, although most were summer cottages. BOQ and the general mess were rated about 2.8 but the food in town was highly sought after. . . . The squadron party at Frediani's on the Russian River highway was the scene — Italian ravioli and red wine. . . ."

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THE ARMY Air Corps was here first, but it always gets the worst of it in all the stories found in the Naval Air squadron yearbooks and also in a recollection written by Ensign Chuck Golden in "Airpower" magazine (Nov. '87). He writes about what happened when the first of the Bearcat fighters, the Grumann F8F, developed at the end of the war, came to SRNAAS.

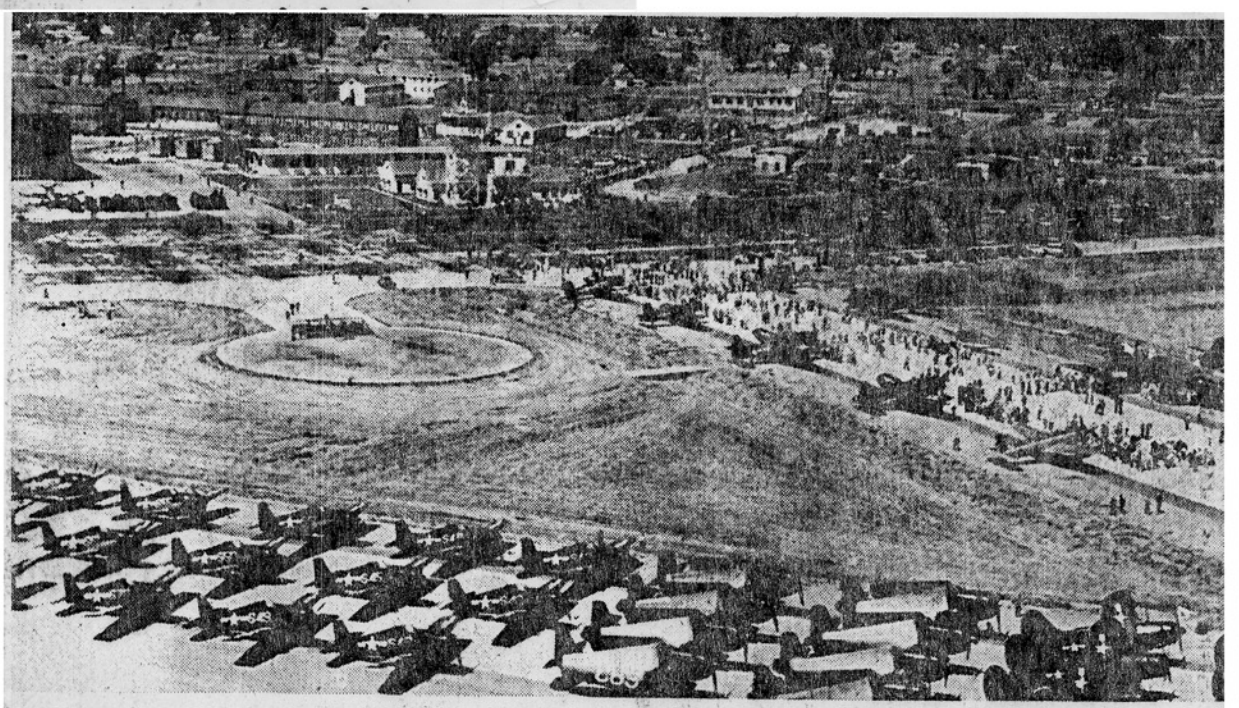
"Near Santa Rosa was a U.S. Army Air Corps base, equipped with Lockheed P-38 Lightnings. Those guys were justly proud of their fighters. Somehow, somewhere, (probably at Lena's) the inevitable discussion occurred. It turned into a challenge match between a P-38 and the F8F. An Army P-38 was flown over and the contest was witnessed by a large crowd of Army and Navy personnel.

"Both fighters were side by side at the end of the runway, fired up, and when both pilots were ready, they were given the signal for fast takeoff."

Proud air corps pilots of P-38s would chew on their "40 mission crush" garrison caps to read the rest of the account. The Bearcat cleared the runway in about 100 feet, and had turned and made a pass before the Army plane had lifted off.

At least, that's the way the Navy tells it.

If the Army pilots have another version, they can join the farewell party next weekend and tell it to the Navy.



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Wartime photographs of the Santa Rosa Naval Air Station are rare. This one was taken on the first Navy Day after V-J Day in August of 1945, when Commander George Richard (who came back to Santa Rosa to work in real estate after the war) invited the community to an open house and air show. In the foreground, left to right, are the Navy's Hellcat fighters, Avenger torpedo bombers and Helldiver dive bombers. Among the planes in the background are two Japanese Zeros, captured in Saigon and flown in for the show.

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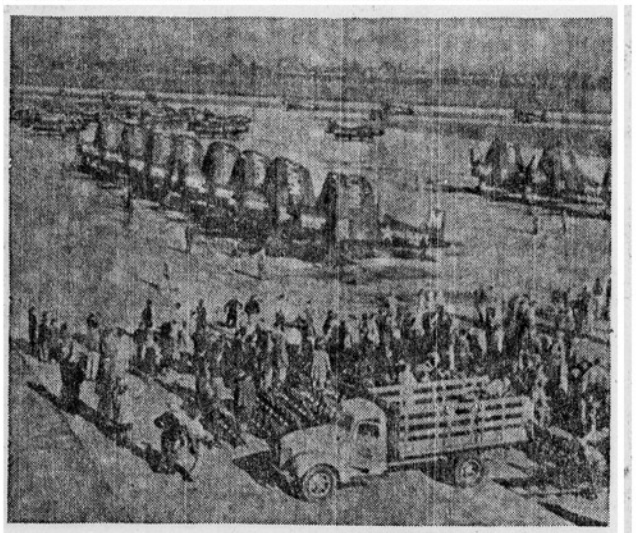
The NAAS tower was taken down in the 1960s, leaving Air Center pilots to use the runways at their own discretion.



YEARBOOK OF CARRIER AIR GROUP TWO

Reactivated in June of 1951 for the Korean War, the Naval Air Station once again invited its neighbors, this time to view the jet Skyraiders, Panthers and Corsairs.

GAYE LeBARON'S NOTEBOOK

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