



# U.S. MARINES AT TWENTYNINE PALMS, CALIFORNIA

by

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HISTORY AND MUSEUMS DIVISION  
HEADQUARTERS, U.S. MARINE CORPS  
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# Foreword

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The mention of the Marine Corps Base at Twentynine Palms once evoked an image of a tent city alongside a dry lake bed in the middle of the oppressive Mojave Desert of Southern California. Such an image might have been true of the first facilities established in 1952, when the Marines moved up to the high desert from Camp Pendleton. Today, however, the close to 1,000-square-mile Air Ground Combat Center at Twentynine Palms ranks as one of the Corps' most modern training facilities.

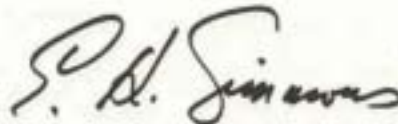
This volume is the second in the series of histories covering major Marine Corps bases and training centers. The highly-personalized narrative not only provides a general history of the base, but covers the growth of the surrounding community.

The author of this monograph, Colonel Verle E. Ludwig, USMC (Retired), is well qualified to write a history of Twentynine Palms. Colonel Ludwig, a graduate of the University of Indiana with a degree in journalism and of George Washington University with a master's degree in international affairs, was commissioned a second lieutenant in September 1944. During World War II, he joined the 1st Marine Division in the Russell Islands, and then as a rifle platoon leader, participated in the Okinawa Campaign and North China occupation duty. His key assignments after rejoining the Corps during the Korean War were: Historical Writer, Headquarters U. S. Marine Corps; Commanding Officer, Marine Barracks, Hunters Point; Commanding Officer, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines in Vietnam; Deputy Information Officer, MACV, Saigon; Marine chair in Amphibious Warfare, Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island; and, in 1973, Chief of Staff and then Deputy Commander, Marine Corps Base, Twentynine Palms.

Colonel Ludwig has been a prolific writer for many years. He co-authored the first volume of the history of U. S. Marine Corps operations in World War II, *Pearl Harbor to Guadalcanal*, has written numerous articles for both the *Marine Corps Gazette* and *Leatherneck*, and has authored several short stories.

The author retired from active duty in 1975 and now resides in Twentynine Palms, where he teaches a course in writing at several local colleges. His history of Twentynine Palms was supported in part by a grant from the Marine Corps Historical Foundation.

In the pursuit of accuracy and objectivity, the History and Museums Division welcomes comments on the history from key participants, Marine Corps activities, and interested individuals.



E. H. SIMMONS  
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Director of Marine Corps History and Museums

# Preface

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Twentynine Palms, community and military base, is something of its own sort because of its desert, and because most residents—into at least the mid-1980s—sought to adjust to the desert rather than to conquer it. I hope this book conveys something of the human qualities of this uniqueness.

My association with the U.S. Marine Corps base goes back to 1952, “the moment of creation,” when the desert training center as an outpost of Camp Joseph H. Pendleton was in the scuttlebutt stage around the base down by Oceanside; and as a young captain commanding a rifle company, I came up to the new training center in the two weeks prior to Christmas of 1952 to take part in the first big exercise with the 3d Marine Division, then newly re-formed at Pendleton.

In 1954 at Headquarters Marine Corps, after I had been to wartime duty in Korea, I did some staff papers about Twentynine Palms, for budget officers to take up to hearings on Capitol Hill. These papers of mine turned up in a stack of material the Marine Corps History and Museums Division sent to me when I began research for this book, in 1983.

I returned to Twentynine Palms, for an official visit, in the early 1960s, when I then (“seconded” there by the 1st Marine Division) commanded Automatic Supply Distribution Battalion, Force Service Regiment, at Pendleton. Ammunition Company was in that battalion, and technically we therefore “owned” the Nuclear Ordnance Platoon (NOP) then at the NOP site at Twentynine Palms. During this trip I discovered the NOP building some distance out in the desert from mainside was “plagued” by crickets which apparently liked the building’s air conditioning, and the Marines there had requisitioned some chickens to devour the crickets.

In 1973, I returned for permanent duty, first as base chief of staff when the commanding general was Brigadier General William G. Joslyn, then as the assistant commander of the combined base-Force Troops command after the late Brigadier General Clarence H. “Bud” Schmid replaced Bill Joslyn. As this historical narrative relates, Bud Schmid had been at Twentynine Palms as a young supply officer captain in the very early days. He and his wife, Margaretta, introduced the Ludwigs to many of the Twentynine Palms oldtimers the Schmidts had known back in the early years. From the Schmidts, and from our many new friends among the oldtimers, I heard the human stories of the founding of the town, the glider base, and later the Marine Corps facility. To these friends I owe much of my understanding of the community and the desert.

Many of these friends have made family archives available, and have talked with me about those early days. These include Helen Bagley, Ted and Mary Hayes, Ada Hatch, Sally Ince, Chet and Blance Ellis, and Vinton Harz and his late wife, Lois. I gained much valuable guidance and assistance, also, from those well-known historians of this and other nearby deserts, Harold and Lucile Weight; and also from that newer practitioner of local history, Art Kidwell.

Marines who have been especially helpful in guiding me to an understanding of particularly the early days of the base are: first and foremost, Dr. Frederick H. Scantling (Lieutenant Colonel, USMC [Ret.]), the first commanding officer for Marines in the desert, and Brigadier General John S. “Barney” Oldfield, USMC (Ret.), who commanded non-FMF Marines as the desert facility became a base in its own right.

Those Marines who contributed significantly to my understanding of the transition to the New Mission include: Colonel Billy D. "Bill" Bouldin; former base commanders Major Generals Edward J. Megarr and Harold G. Glasgow; and Major General Robert E. Haebel.

A special notice of appreciation must go to General Louis H. Wilson, the 26th Commandant of the Marine Corps. The New Mission was his idea, originating when he was commanding general of Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, just before he became Commandant. He sent particularly valuable comments about this phase of the history of Twentynine Palms to the Director of Marine Corps History and Museums, Brigadier General Edwin H. Simmons, USMC (Ret.).

For other help, I am indebted to Colonel Francis I. Fenton, Jr., USMC (Ret.), and to his wife, Eloise Rowan Fenton, for reasons which will be apparent in the text of this history, and in Appendix A. Also special thanks must go to Colonel Richard O. "Owen" Gillick, USMC (Ret.), who served here as a young artillery officer, back in the early years, at other times later, and had saved a useful "cruise book" and other material. Also helpful was retired Colonel Ralph K. Culver, an early legal officer at the desert base, and retired Air Force Major Steven Zvonar, who as an Army engineer in the days just before World War II, surveyed the desert for the establishment of Condor Field. Also helpful have been those loyal retired Marines, Gunnery Sergeant Charlie Miller and the late Gunnery Sergeant Doug Culbertson.

Base commanding generals who served at Twentynine Palms while I was writing this history also have been particularly helpful and supportive. They were Brigadier Generals Joseph B. Knotts, William R. Etnyre, and John P. Monahan.

Another "local" Marine of significant helpfulness was Colonel James E. Stanton, who served early in the New Mission days, and then returned in the 1980s to serve as the base's chief of staff. He provided much insight and immediate support when required. Also particularly helpful have been Mrs. Carol Robinson, secretary to the commanding general, and Sergeant R. W. Allen, a particularly efficient and cheerful Marine assigned to the protocol office.

And last but not least among those on the base, I owe a debt of gratitude to my old friend and the "dean" of desert public information officers, the late CWO4 Ronald R. Fraizer. Thanks to his efforts, the command's public affairs office has bound files of *The Observation Post*, the award-winning base newspaper which began publication when the base separated from Camp Pendleton.

The San Bernardino branch library in Twentynine Palms, under the able charge of its efficient and helpful chief librarian, Cheryl Erickson, has an excellent collection of primary and secondary sources about town and base, going back to the early days of the community. This includes files of the community newspaper, *The Desert Trail*; early settler oral histories; photographs; and unpublished manuscripts, including that of early base commander, the late Colonel (later Brigadier General, retired) Francis H. "Monte" Brink.

In addition, I have consulted official command diaries and other papers forwarded to me by the Marine Corps Historical Center. There Danny J. Crawford, who heads the Reference Section, and his assistant, Robert V. Aquilina, have been unfailing in digging up special requests for me. Also from "Historical," my editors have been, first old friend Henry I. "Bud" Shaw, the chief historian, and then Charles R. Smith. Shortcomings and failures, I must confess, are solely mine.

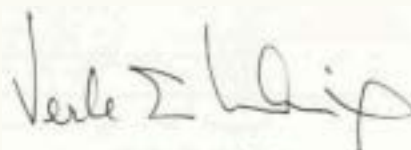
My wife and I love this desert, as we did and do love the Marine Corps. Our hillside retirement home overlooks the base, some 10 miles to our northeast. Years ago, at the then-Historical Branch at Headquarters Marine Corps, I was a co-author (with Bud Shaw and one other) of the first volume of the Marine Corps' history of World War II. But I had no thought of writing the history of this base until, one day in February 1983,

old friend Ed Simmons, the "historical brigadier," sat in our dining room over breakfast and, "out of nowhere" said, "Verle, why don't you do the history of the base here?"

The company was excellent. The coffee outstanding. The evening before, we had enjoyed a fine Chinese dinner which my wife had prepared for Ed Simmons and a number of Marines and their wives, as well as some other friends from town. During that evening, we had a few drinks—a bit of excellent California wine. The morning, at breakfast, was a moment of pleasant weakness. I said, "Okay."

It was of course more work than I anticipated. Often the project interfered with the creative procrastinations of my retirement. So since that morning in 1983, I have told Ed Simmons and a lot of other people who would listen (their tolerance eroded over time) that I have decided the only thing which would have been worse than his asking me to do this history would have been if he had bypassed me and asked somebody else.

I dedicate this volume to GeneCarolyn Huffman Ludwig and our sons Kurt and Eric, all of whom in their own times picked up the step in my march of 30 years with the U. S. Marine Corps. And to the desert: "Remember that the yield of a hard country is a love deeper than a fat and easy land inspires, that throughout the arid West the Americans have found a secret treasure."—Bernard DeVoto, *The Year of Decision: 1846*.



Verle E. Ludwig

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## CHAPTER 1

# The Desert

Twentynine Palms and its surrounding high desert in the eastern portion of California's Morongo Basin would seem an unlikely location for a major base of an amphibious and air-ground military force. Perhaps it also seems an unlikely location for anything, including the oasis which watered the palms which gave the place its name.

"Off the beaten track" has been an apt description of the area throughout all of its history. Apparently early man and later the American Indian tribes, known to history after the arrival of Europeans, largely bypassed this seemingly inhospitable region by using trails either to the north or to the south. Early routes of empire also went far to the north or to the south of this region.<sup>1</sup> The nearest—still some distance to the south—was the on-to-westward extension of the Santa Fe Trail.

The discoverer of Pike's Peak, Zebulon Montgomery Pike, in 1806 began adventures and misadventures which later, as historian Neal Harlow noted:

precipitated in the establishment of the trail from St. Louis to Santa Fe; and this terminus proved to be the beginning of the southwestern routes to the Pacific. From that ancient New Mexican town, the Gila trail followed down the Rio Grande to the Gila River, along that stream to the Colorado, and across southern California and Warner's Pass to San Diego. The Spanish Trail led from Taos northwestward, over the Green and Sevier Rivers to the Virgin and Colorado, and by way of the Mohave Desert to the Cajon Pass and Los Angeles.<sup>2</sup>

These routes skirted those regions around Twentynine Palms and its Morongo Basin.\*

Earlier routes around the area were much the same. Those following Pike from the old Spanish settlements of the Santa Fe region and on to the Pacific at San Diego or Los Angeles merely moved along the easiest and more prominent routes of the Native Americans. Researchers agree that the present Twentynine Palms oasis likely was settled for centuries prior to the arrival of Western Europeans; evidence also indicates that the location was "the hub of several well-traveled In-

dian trails."<sup>3\*\*</sup> However, the oasis settlement was small, and we do not have enough evidence to judge the significance of its "wheel" among the region's original cultures.

Even in those American Indian days, one had to be in Twentynine Palms "on purpose" so remote was its location, as some Marines would say. Only they, say these Marines, can be here by accident. It takes only a surprise set of orders from headquarters. The implication is that all orders to Twentynine Palms come as a surprise to the individual. And, of course, for early man and for explorers, mountain men, and cattle pushers, a desert is a place to be avoided.

The late Major General Clarence H. "Bud" Schmid, who in 1952-53 was the first base supply officer at Twentynine Palms, and later (1974-75) its 14th commanding general, used to say in his orientation talks with new arrivals that no one except the Marine Corps ever came to the desert to get organized. Dwellers in the area, he would say, are much like the vegetation here: they seek and require distance, one from the other; they have a serene beauty of their own; they are great and helpful neighbors; but they have sharp thorns or other defensive measures if crowded or bothered thoughtlessly.

Then he would say the roadside desert flowers—patches and spots of great beauty to the true aficionado of the desert—were watered by the tears of Marine wives riding into the desert for the first time with their husbands and sets of those "surprise" orders. But after the howls of laughter and the applause would die down, General Schmid would add: "but think about *this* as you begin your duty here: there are flowers on both sides of the road."

The desert does not, in truth, grow on everyone who serves here—fortunately, most early and some later settlers say. But it happens often enough that by the mid-1980s both town and Marine base were growing at a rate considered alarming to some of the earlier

\*A look at a map reveals, of course, that there is a bit of an overland gap between the Rio Grande and Gila in what is now southwest New Mexico; this still was known as the Gila Trail, however.

\*\*Mara or Marah is a name which early explorers believed some of the American Indians called the oasis which became known as Twentynine Palms. As with many other fine points about how "Mara" and "Twentynine Palms" originated as names for the location, there are many uncertainties.



National Park Service Photo 275-412

*The high desert of southern California presents rugged mountains, vast expanses of flat parched earth, sparse but picturesque vegetation, and a varied animal population.*

settlers who never wanted to see that much organization crowd around them.

First “owners” of the oasis, later called Twentynine Palms, arrived after the place came into pretty much its present geological configuration. They probably were clans of the ancestors of those California and Southwest Desert Indians called generically by early Spanish explorers (much south of Twentynine Palms), the *Serrano*. This Spanish term, meaning merely that Indians so-called were from the mountains or highlands, apparently found its way into general use in Spanish America through the field notes of (among others) Padre Pedro Font, who was with a Spanish expedition in Alta California in 1775. As has been pointed out, the padre was not close to what has become Twentynine Palms, but his description apparently was not unsuited to the Indians which frequented this oasis. Font said the Indians he saw in the Alta California highlands were small but strong, and “friendly, gentle and of good heart.”<sup>4</sup>

Later tribes and clans which visited and lived at the oasis for various periods of time included Cahuilla, Chemehuevi, Paiute, Mojave, and probably others. Some of these endured at the oasis into the period of the Federal Indian Reservations programs.

After the United States’ war with Mexico ended with the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ceded

Alta California, along with Nevada, Utah, most of Arizona, as well as portions of New Mexico, Colorado, and Wyoming to the United States, the westward push of “Manifest Destiny” settlers began to pick up speed. As we shall see, “real civilization” did not come to the oasis of Twentynine Palms until after World War I, but the American flag, followed shortly by the Gold Rush (which started in 1849), soon began to touch even this desert region. Non-Indians began to arrive—on purpose.

At about the mid-point of the 19th Century—give or take a few years on either side of 1850—a San Geronio Pass cattleman named Paulino Weaver apparently established a route eastward from the Pass through the Morongo Basin and Twentynine Palms. There is uncertainty on the date because Weaver kept his route a secret, since it was a business advantage for him to do so. His route got cattle to markets in Arizona quicker than did competitive routes along the lowlands to and through the present Indio, California. Indications are that friendly Indians had shown Weaver how to manage this route for his advantage, when desert rains of fall and winter would have provided brief grazing periods across the way.\*

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\*Amidst early gold mining and settlements in the area, parts of the present Joshua Tree National Monument were used for cattle ranching. This was later than the Weaver route period.

Weaver had been in the Southwest for years. During the war with Mexico, he had been a scout for the Mormon Battalion which opened "a wagon road by the Gila Route to the Pacific," and which later garrisoned and operated from the Cajon Pass.<sup>5\*</sup>

Earlier, while some elements of the Mormon Battalion garrisoned the Cajon Pass, the U.S. military established several forts along the Mojave Trail from the pass and the San Bernardino area to Fort Mojave on the Colorado (near the present town of Needles, California.) With increased travel, this route became known as the Government Road. From Fort Mojave, it crossed Arizona to Fort Defiance, and on to Santa Fe. Thus, the Mormon Battalion, along with other U.S. Army forces, contributed to keeping well beaten tracks away from that out-of-the-way region of Twentynine Palms and the Morongo Basin.

Growing responses by U.S. citizens to the lure of gold and to the new regions won from Mexico required more than wagon, cattle, and stage routes, however. Some time after Weaver's road went through the Mojave Desert past Twentynine Palms, the Federal General Land Office began to hire private surveyors to establish bench marks and other reference points throughout the Southwest. This was in preparation for more complete surveys for railroad routes, an activity begun in 1853 when Congress authorized funds for the Army Corps of Engineers to begin those surveys. One of these private surveyors, a Colonel Henry Washington, in 1852 fixed the San Bernardino base line from a point atop Mt. San Bernardino east and west across California. Such lines provided the base for the establishment of other points and lines which divided land into townships, sections, and other political divisions.

Later, in 1855, Colonel Washington arrived at the oasis at Twentynine Palms, and provided the first recorded official report about this spot. His notes of 26 May 1855 say: "From this corner, an Indian Wigwam (near a spring of good water, supposed to be per-

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\*Of Weaver, Ronald Dean Miller, in his *Mines of the High Desert*, p. 8, says: "Weaver, scout for the Mormon Battalion, San Gotgonio cattleman and discoverer of the La Paz and Hassayampa placer strikes, trapped and hunted over much of the Southwest. He was known all over the region. Prescott, Arizona claims him as its first citizen, as does Wickenburg, for it was in Arizona that he spent the last years of his life, employed as a scout for the Army." His route through the Morongo Basin and past the oasis at Twentynine Palms "had long been used by the Indians, and perhaps Weaver found it by the simple method of being taken over it by his Chemehuevi or Serrano friends. Weaver's Road followed what is now the San Bernardino Base Line through the Greater Morongo Basin to the Colorado River."

manent) bears N 51 degrees W, and a small cluster of Cabbage Palmettos bears N 27 degrees W."<sup>6</sup>

Just when somebody counted and found 29 California fan palms at the oasis is not clear. "Palm City" or "Palm Springs" apparently was used for some time. Palm Springs, of course, was a name which later slipped downhill, to the southwest, and across the San Andreas fault. The name Mara, or Marah, often is attributed to the Indians whom European and American explorers found at the oasis, but apparently it did not find its way into any official status as a name for the place in post-Indian settlements. The names of "Palm Springs" or "Palm City" are sometimes credited to a surveyor who came through a year after Washington, but local historian Lucile Weight finds no evidence for his use of such a name.

This 1856 surveyor was Alex P. Green, working for the U.S. to add to the Washington survey. At the time of his survey, Green noted:

Near the springs the land has the appearance of having been cultivated by the Indians . . . The Indians use the leaf of the palm trees for making baskets, hats, etc. Around the springs there is a growth of cane of which the Indians make arrows for their bows.<sup>7</sup>

Linda W. Greene in her Historic Resource Study for the National Park Service notes references to the name, "Palm Springs," into the 1880s, but also finds the number "29" used with "Palms" or "Palm Springs" as early as the 1870s. And Miller, in his *Mines of the High Desert*, says "the name Twentynine Palms was in common use by 1872, being used on the description of a mining claim by McKenzie and Germain" in that year.

Observations of Green, the surveyor, that Indians at the oasis had part of the plot under cultivation may be an indication that the oasis had become a more permanent settlement than it might have been in days when subsistence depended more on hunting. Although the cultivation of maize, beans, and squash was practiced in the New World, beginning in the Mexican highlands at least by 1500 BC, by the time of U.S. surveys in the West, Indians certainly had picked up additional crops and skills from the Spanish, their missions, and later explorers and settlers. However, it seemed that because of its remote location, the oasis at Twentynine Palms supported only small Indian settlements; and in any event most desert Indians seemed to have remained wanderers, follow-

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<sup>6</sup>Some writers have said 29 May. But Lucile Weight shows that his field notes before and after would seem to indicate the correct date to be the 26th.



National Park Service Photo 275-408

*Cottonwood Springs Oasis in Joshua Tree National Monument, with its native California fan palms is typical of the high-desert oases from which Twentynine Palms got its name.*

ing game, moisture, weather, and materials for their crafts of living. Into modern times, some reservation Indians in the arid Southwest have two or three homes—hogans or other accommodations—and they move to and from these with the seasons.

It had perhaps always been such, even in earlier times. As with other life in the Southwest, local Indians were nomads, but territorial, because they had to live off the land, its waters, and sky. Petroglyphs attributed to "early man" remain on the Marine base and in the Joshua Tree National Monument. On the base, the petroglyphs are found near what is thought to have been an early inland lake when most of the Morongo Basin may have been "a fertile, lush area, rich in vegetation and animal life."<sup>7</sup> The site now appears to have been a bathing area, an easy entry onto the lake, or an access to a shallow crossing. Nearby are the petroglyphs, along a bank of lava. A bulletin board? Prehistoric graffiti? A local "Rosetta Stone" has never been found.

Reservations for Indians in the desert Southwest were sought by federal authorities as early as 1856, but ownership of the land was contested by the railroads

and others. President Ulysses S. Grant (1869-77) reorganized the Department of Indian Affairs, and ordered the establishment of a number of small reservations in southern California. One result of this was the opening in San Bernardino in 1877 of an office for supervising some of these reservations. This Mission Agency assumed control over the reservation at Twentynine Palms, among others.

Disputes, incorrect surveys, confusion, and encroachment by non-Indians continued, however, as railroads and settlers pushed into the Southwest. In March 1873, Joseph Voshay filed homestead claims on Twentynine Palms land which included the Indians' oasis camp, and a year later a Mr. Hoff claimed 160 acres adjacent to Voshay.<sup>8</sup> There were others, plus filings for five-acre mill sites in a broad area mostly north, east, and southeast of the oasis. These were gold hunters, who in those days filed claims first and let others think of questions later.

Water from the oasis, and from other low spots, made it possible for these early prospectors to live and work in the area. In some cases water was used for washing out the ore in a variety of trough-like con-

trivances, large and small, which separated the dirt, rock, and gravel, and allowed the heavier gold to work its way to the bottom along with other minerals and black sand. From this the gold then would be extracted by panning or other methods. However, most of the dry country gold mills of this early period which dealt with quartz veins—as was the case around Twentynine Palms—used the *arrastra* method, which used less water per ton of dirt.\*

A yield of \$100 worth of gold per ton of tailings was considered a good return from an *arrastra* in the Twentynine Palms region.<sup>9</sup> This estimate probably did not hold true for many of the mines, say modern-day local amateur miners and students of the craft. The price of gold in those days ran around \$20 to \$25 per ounce. The work to get that ounce was prodigious. Observers in that early day said that about 500 pounds of tailings went into each batch for an *arrastra* some 10 feet in diameter. Grinding then took from three to four hours. Mercury was added in amounts based on estimates of the richness of the quartz. By weight, miners used about 25 percent more mercury than expected gold. Near the end of the grinding, about a dozen or so buckets of water would be poured into the *arrastra*, and grinding continued until a beige "paste" was achieved. Water and sludge were then bailed out, or run off quickly, and the whole process

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\**Arrastra*, from the Spanish verb, *arrastrar*—to drag. This method apparently originated in quartz-vein mining in dry areas of Mexico where the masculine spelling, *arrastre*, is more common. (And in the early U.S. mining in the Southwest, the *arrastra* frequently was called a "raster.") As a contemporary observer described it: "These are the most primitive kind of contrivance for grinding quartz. They are circular plates, ten or twelve feet in diameter, flagged with flat stones, and in these the quartz is crushed by two large heavy stones dragged round and round by a mule harnessed to a horizontal beam, to which they are also attached."

Enough water was used in the *arrastra* "pit" to turn the ground dirt into a rich beige mud. Gold then worked its way down into the grooves between the flagstones in the "floor," and after rocks, dirt and sludge were disposed of, the gold could be extracted by introducing mercury into the grooves. When these grooves were emptied of the mixture of mercury and gold, this amalgam was put into a retort and distilled. The mercury could then be used again.

Ronald Miller states that in the absence of a retort, many old time miners would squeeze the amalgam through an old sock. The mercury would pass through the fabric, but the gold would not. This practice, Miller speculated, was the reason for many old mining claims being named the "Dirty Sock." From Miller, *Marz*, and from the contemporary observer, J. D. Borthwick, quoted in a *Centennial Supplement to the California Journal of Mines and Geology* for October 1949. This supplement, entitled *The Elephant as They Saw It*, was assembled by Elisabeth L. Egenhoff, for the California Division of Mines. The little booklet, with many historic illustrations, has gone through a few reissues of two to three thousand copies.

started again with another quarter-ton of tailings. Depending on the richness of the batches, this process was kept up for quite a number of days before the amalgam of mercury and gold was dug out of the crevices and separated. Gold usually was melted into bars or ingots, the mercury collected for use again.<sup>10</sup>

Modern estimates doubt that even strong men and strong burros could maintain a ton-a-day pace of operations in those early days, before steam engines and larger *arrastras* appeared on the scene. And if \$100 per ton was a good return in the Twentynine Palms region, a yield considered "bad" had to be a judgment call. William Germain, who had filed on a claim in 1872, sold out in 1876 to a John Dore for "25 dollars cash and one white-faced horse valued at 20 dollars."<sup>11</sup>

This early mining flurry in the Twentynine Palms region subsided by 1883, and the oasis region was comparatively quiet and inactive again.<sup>12</sup> Dreams of gold hunters spring eternal, though, and mining continued at Dale, east of Twentynine Palms, and in other regions a day or two away by freight wagon. Marginal mining in the area continued, off and on, into modern times. In the 1970s and 80s, after gold ownership again became legal for U.S. citizens and gold prices for a time topped \$800 an ounce, major milling operations returned to the region, using methods more sophisticated than the *arrastra*.

Despite all of these visits of the white man, some Indians remained around the oasis on into the first decade or so of the 1900s, but most drifted closer to the growing population centers of the San Geronimo Pass region where some work was available—mostly on farms, ranches, and in orchards. There Clara True, superintendent of the Banning Indian Agency, ran apparently efficient and compassionate reservation programs. She served in that role from 1908 to 1910, and may have been the first Indian Service employee to visit Twentynine Palms.<sup>13</sup> She is credited with beginning official records and reports of Indian life and occupation of the oasis, and she tried to sort out the claims and counter-claims on the surrounding lands. Although the Indian Commissioner had reserved the oasis tract for the Indians on 16 September 1891, Southern Pacific Railroad claims, and those of others, appeared to encroach.

Clara True and one of her associates at the Agency in Banning, William E. Johnson, in July of 1908 filed claims on land in the area, to ensure that the Indians were not edged out of their homesite. These probably were mining claims, which included water rights, and the superintendent obviously was trying to help the Indians protect their rights to their traditional



Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, Twentynine Palms

*A number of primitive Indian petroglyphs, as these, are found throughout the Fox Trot and Basalt Flow training areas of the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center.*

land. She and Johnson signed over their claims to the Indians, as had been their intent from the beginning. But it was to no avail. Such efforts got Clara True fired. The surge of Manifest Destiny was not to be denied. This drive of the white man, plus the infamous Willie Boy episode of 1909, hastened the exodus of the California Indians from the oasis at Twentynine Palms.

The manhunt for murderer Willie Boy, a Paiute Indian from southwest desert regions, has been much glamorized by Harry Lawton in his fictional account, *Willie Boy: A Desert Manhunt* (Balboa Island, California: Paisano Press, 1960), and by the Robert Redford-Robert Blake movie, *Tell Them Willie Boy is Here* (Universal, 1969), based on the Lawton book.\* Actually, the episode was a sordid and grimy affair. Apparently drunk, Willie Boy murdered the leader of the Twentynine Palms Indians at a ranch near Banning, and then ran off with this leader's daughter, fleeing into the rugged desert terrain of the northern rim of the Morongo Basin.<sup>14</sup>

Posses from both San Bernardino and Riverside

\*Redford played the part of manhunt leader "Cooper," Blake, the part of Willie Boy. Katherine Ross played the kidnapped girl, and Susan Clark, the reservation superintendent, Clara True.

counties, supervised by Riverside County Sheriff Frank Wilson, finally found Willie Boy after he had killed the girl and, a short time later, himself. In all, the chase lasted 11 days and covered some 500 to 600 miles in, around, and across the Morongo Basin, passing through the Twentynine Palms oasis region once. Newspapers in San Bernardino and Riverside gave the whole affair rather lurid coverage. Accounts of the day invented notions of an Indian uprising, to be led by Willie Boy from bases in Arizona Territory, and stories even tried to imply that President William Howard Taft, then touring California, was somehow endangered by this trouble.\*\* Lawton, and later, the movie, turned the episode into "the last great manhunt of the Old West."

\*\*Erickson's account relied upon contemporary newspaper accounts, official "after action" reports, and interviews with at least one member of the posse. The account is perhaps the most even-handed and straightforward telling of the tale, an episode which apparently cries out for over-dramatic analysis as more and more years wash over the poor Indian's trail. Erickson, a former Marine Corps officer who once served at Twentynine Palms, manages the San Bernardino County Branch Library in Yucca Valley. He and his wife and son have lived in Twentynine Palms for a number of years. Mrs. Erickson manages the library branch in Twentynine Palms.

But the only things endangered were the reservation lands in Twentynine Palms, and the even-handed policies of Clara True. She was forced to resign. Area settlers, miners, and railroad officials believed she was too strict in her interpretation of the rights of the Indians and of the boundaries assigned to their lands.

Most of the remaining Indians began to drift away from the oasis at Twentynine Palms. A warranty deed dated 31 July 1911 shifted title to the Twentynine Palms Reservation from the Southern Pacific Railroad to the United States. The following year, only five

small families remained at the oasis, and in 1913, the last of these probably left, because the federal government in that year revoked Indian water rights because of non-residency.<sup>16</sup>

Still distant, still well off the beaten path, Twentynine Palms nonetheless was on the map. A new breed of adventurer and prospector had arrived on the scene. Pioneer cattlemen began to scratch up "tanks" of adobe and rocks to catch precious rain along Paulino Weaver's old road. In Twentynine Palms more and more people were showing up—on purpose.

## CHAPTER 2

# The Community

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Although the early gold milling activity near the Twentynine Palms oasis had moved away by 1883, prospectors still scouted the countryside, and some important new finds were made a few miles east of the oasis. By that time, a prospector named Lou Curtis had found placer gold in erosion cuts some 15 to 20 miles east of the old Indian camps. Others made additional finds, and soon a well was put down at a dry lake site for an arrastra which began to mill for miners who arrived on the scene. The community of Dale, and later another called New Dale, grew up in these areas near the present Twentynine Palms highway. Although apparently quite small, these communities passed for boom towns of the "gold rush" in the early days in this region. A sketch map of New Dale in Ronald Dean Miller's book shows two saloons and a red light district.<sup>1</sup> A California State Mine Bureau report of 1896 lists several gold mines in the region.

As gold mining operations in the late 1800s and the early 1900s became more ambitious and sophisticated, so the dreams and failures became larger. Hazel M. Spell, who came to Twentynine Palms in the 1920s and later married a former miner, says in her book, *The Twentynine Palms Story*, that her observations in this region and her research never turned up "authentic records of anyone having made substantial fortunes from these early ventures."<sup>2</sup> She adds that later, unscrupulous promoters probably made much more money selling worthless gold mine stock than did any of the mining operations. A miner from the 1911-16 period told her, "well, we didn't make much—maybe fifteen or twenty thousand dollars all told"; and this from a rather efficient operation for this later period.<sup>3</sup>

Later maps of the mining districts around Twentynine Palms indicate, to the east, southeast, and south of Dale, districts with such names as Monte Negras, Eagle Mountain, and Cottonwood. Closer to Twentynine Palms was the old mining district around the oasis, called the Twentynine Palms District. South of that, into what is now the Joshua Tree National Monument lands near the border between San Bernardino and Riverside Counties, were the Washington Mining District and the Gold Park District. South and a bit west of the Gold Park was the Pinon District, and then

northwest of that some mines with such colorful names as the Lost Horse, the Desert Queen, and the Gypsy Queen. North of the sprawling acres of the present Marine Corps base, and south of the small town of Ludlow, where old Route 66 formerly went by in days before and after World War II, gold and copper mines of Camp Rochester reportedly produced some of the best returns of this desert region. Other smaller mines, now long forgotten, dotted areas of what is now the Marine base.

While these mining districts spread considerable difficult miles from Twentynine Palms, the little community beside the oasis continued to grow only very slowly. Wagons with freight for the mines came from Banning in the San Gorgonio Pass eastward up the Morongo grade into the high basin, past Warren Well (site of the present village of Yucca Valley), and through Twentynine Palms to the Dale district. Another route came down from the north, generally along what is now the Amboy Road; and still another route, serving the mining districts south of Dale, came up from Mecca (in the Coachella Valley near the Salton Sea). And while Dale and some of the other mining camps were livelier than Twentynine Palms, the latter's oasis remained a major magnet for the entire area.

At the turn of the century, most California cities near the coast still were quite small, but from the start dwellers in this new state, so recently won from Mexico, and so quickly thereafter inspired and dazzled by a gold rush, were incurable explorers and lookers. The mines, and even just the desert, attracted dreamers after gold, prospective settlers, sightseers, and latter-day frontiersmen dreaming who knows how many varieties of the "what if" dreams which spread Americans from sea to shining sea.

A latter-day frontier—that's what Twentynine Palms became. This small basin of remote desert, off the beaten track, became a throwback to a period long since gone elsewhere in the United States. For gold, for adventure, for health, for curiosity, for privacy, the settlers began to dribble in. It was a wonder of desolation, this land—scorched by a relentless sun glaring through air so pure it could not stop the day's heat



National Park Service Photo

*Mining equipment of this kind can be found at abandoned gold claims scattered throughout both the Air Ground Combat Center and nearby Joshua Tree National Monument.*

and could not stop the heat's escape at night. Then the limitless sky shone with stars which seemed to arch all the way back home to eastern cities, and yet on again westward to those growing places by the Pacific. One could imagine both poles of the earth encompassed by that canopy of sparkling wonder. There were winds, now and then, which put dust in lungs and grit in cooking gear and kitchen larders. There were cold winds in winter, and frosts, and now and then snow. There were flash floods capable of carrying away a camp site, a feeble desert road, or even the foundation of an ambitious home. But for many persons who stayed, or kept coming back, a strange and wondrous thing happened. Good health happened. One could feel better in the desert. Healthy persons noticed it. And, often, those with ill health noted marked improvement in their well-being. These were the years of tuberculosis, asthma, all sorts of problems of lung congestion brought out of the places of the industrial revolution in Europe and the eastern United States. Then, people sought out deserts to find new health for themselves or members of their families. Evidence indicated—slowly at first, and then with growing assurance—that here in this basin around the old Oasis of Mara existed one of the better health-giving deserts of America.

One of the early health seekers in Twentynine Palms was Bill Campbell, husband of Elizabeth W. Crozer Campbell who left excellent accounts of early desert life in her book, *The Desert Was Home*. Bill and Betty Campbell arrived at the oasis in December of 1924. Bill's lungs had been damaged by mustard gas in France during World War I, and doctors in the east had sent him to southern California—first, to the Pasadena area. But he did not thrive there, and Betty was told by a doctor that "I had better take him to the desert if I hoped to save him."<sup>4</sup> Mrs. Campbell does not say who this doctor was, and she gives the impression that the reference to the desert was general.\*

They wandered from place to place, she wrote, apparently for some time, with a tent and light camping gear in "an old second-hand Franklin car, and with

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\*There seems little doubt that the doctor was James B. Luckie, whom we shall meet just a bit later in this chapter, and that he specified Twentynine Palms. Betty Campbell fell out with almost everyone at one time or several—including her father who put her on notice that she gave up her inheritance when she married Bill. By the time she wrote her book, Betty had fallen out with Dr. Luckie, and he is not mentioned in the work at all. Helen Bagley agrees that there is little doubt that the Campbells had been directed to Twentynine Palms, and by Dr. Luckie.



National Park Service Photo 273-411  
*The dry climate brought many early settlers to the region dominated by numerous species of colorful cacti, yuccas, mesquite, spidery ocotillo, and picturesque Joshua trees.*

a small sum of money in cash." Then, probably somewhere near Palms Springs:

Finally on an old man's recommendation we followed a dim wagon track, which, twisting through mountains and valleys, brought us to a line of springs in a deep valley, where we found shelter from the wind. Weary and discouraged after driving the almost abandoned road, we camped under the cottonwoods when it was too dark to see our surroundings clearly, set up our tent, and spent our first night at the place marked on old maps as 'Twenty-nine Palms.'

Although some mining activity picked up after World War I (during which military duties or higher

pay elsewhere thinned the mining ranks) and the area remained sparsely settled.

Only about eight or nine shacks existed in the valley at that time, [yet] it was surprising how many people came to the spring for water. Cow men passing through, miners going and coming from distant claims, prospectors with their burros, and occasionally a stray tourist stopped. Once a long caravan of Indians passed, going east.

It seems impossible to establish when the more-organized settlement of the community began

with the "lungers"—those with lung problems from World War I gas, or from tuberculosis of the period. But it seems clear that Bill Campbell was one of the early ones. Local historian Lucile Weight states:

We usually think of the founding of modern Twentynine Palms as taking place in 1926 or 1927 when the first noticeable influx of veterans took place here. However, the germ probably was there in 1919. And one of the veterans has spoken of 1922-23 as being the genesis. One record states that Pasadena Post 15, American Legion, "wanted to start" the outpost in the desert in May 1924; this appears in the summary prepared for the cornerstone in San Bernardino County Building in the [Twentynine Palms] Civic Center.\*\*

"During the 1920s" and "In the early 1920s" are phrases used by early settler Hazel Spell in her excellent little book, *The Twentynine Palms Story*, to establish the earliest days of settlement for the sake of homes. Hazel arrived in 1929, "burdened with ill health and the responsibility of caring for my two small children." In those "early 1920s," Spell noted:

A few daring homesteaders braved the winding sandy roads into the valley in search of new home sites. This took real courage, as, aside from the few miners and prospectors hanging on, there apparently was nothing to appeal to the homesteader.\*\*\*

And when Frank and Helen Bagley arrived to stay, in the fall of 1927 with their three small sons, Helen Bagley wrote:

There was not even a mile of straight road. More important, there was no school, post office, or store. The Gold Park Hotel, then east of the Oasis of Mara, sold groceries from its stock, when they could be spared, and gasoline, to homesteaders who had "run out." No group of buildings could be called a village. A population of from fifty to one hundred persons was scattered from Yucca Valley to the Dale mining district, and from the dry lake [present Marine base main side] to the Oasis. There was a cattle ranch near Yucca Valley and a few prospectors in the hills. Most of the settlers were homesteaders, and many of them were veterans of World War I. It was a frontier community.<sup>16</sup>

Lucile Weight notes that although she has no quarrel with Helen Bagley's description of the town when the Bagleys arrived, it might be well to point out that the Gold Park Hotel served as post office from about that time in the fall of 1927, and that a school was then a-building. The Gold Park took on a branch library in the following spring, also.

\*It might also be noted here that in the early 1980s, a new county building was built some miles east of Twentynine Palms, a sign that metropolitan ways are creeping slowly into the Morongo Basin.

\*\*She might have added to her "nothing to appeal" the words "except a chance for better health." This search for health was, after all, what brought Hazel up here with her children.

Why was the community so spread out? In addition to General Bud Schmid's later observation that desert dwellers sought plenty of space, like the creosote bush, and that nobody save the Marine Corps ever came to the desert to get organized, there was the main fact of homesteading—a homestead in those days had to be a quarter-section of land—160 acres. The five-acre homestead did not come until much later. "Jack-rabbit" homesteads they were called by "real" homesteaders, and they were to some extent things of the Great Depression. To old timers, who had to serve total residency requirements on their quarter sections as opposed to weekending which the "jackrabbits" could get by with, these newcomers looked a bit like hothouse plants brought out from the big cities, from the "inside."\*\*\*\*

And why was there a Gold Park Hotel if, as Helen Bagley reports, there were maybe only 50 to 100 settlers in all of the Morongo Basin to the Dale Mining District, and "no group of buildings could be called a village"? In 1985 Helen said: mainly for the miners and the freighters, plus some tourists exploring the desert—and some of them were health-seekers, too. Helen recalled that back in 1927 her mother, then living in Oregon, sent some money to brighten their first Christmas in Twentynine Palms. "It was a five dollar bill," Helen said. She and Frank used the money to treat themselves and their three sons to Christmas dinner at the Gold Park Hotel. She said she did not remember the entire menu, but it stayed in her mind that the table was bright with red candles, and that they had red Jello.

Local historian Lucile Weight reports that E. E. Chapman started building the Gold Park in 1925. It was east of the oasis, across from the present visitors' center of the National Monument. It was a one-story frame structure, flanked by some cabins where guests could stay. The larger building housed the restaurant, and a "common" space which could pass as a lobby or lounge room. Later, the Gold Park migrated west-

\*\*\*In the early days, settlers in Twentynine Palms used the term "going inside" for making the journey back to "civilization" along the coast. Much later, Marines on the base would speak of "getting the browns" (as opposed to "getting the blues") and needing to "go down below" to bright spots of supermarkets, department stores, and other liberty attractions. Bud Schmid said that in 1952 and 1953, much of Twentynine Palms still was on the barter system, and that he and his family often needed to drive to farm markets in Hemet to replenish their larders in those early days before an adequate commissary was established. Still later, "going down below" became described by a Marine-invented verb, "to swoop." This was mostly a vernacular of the liberty-bound Marine, as in: "I'm swooping this weekend," or, "If you're going to swoop, can I bum a ride?"

ward and became the present Twentynine Palms Inn, a complex which remains, friendly and quaint, to remind all comers that the pioneer period of this niche of desert was not so very long ago.

On the Fourth of July 1965, when population on the Marine Base was beginning to thin down because of units heading for that new war in Vietnam, an old veteran of World War I looked at the Twentynine Palms folks assembled to dedicate the community's Luckie Park, and claimed for himself and others of his peers, the B.A. degree, because "we existed here Before Anything." That was William J. Underhill, who a few years after his "BA" days brought the first linotype machine into the high desert to found *The Desert Trail*, the community's first legal newspaper.

Bill Underhill had been among those many veterans, "back in the 20s," who—as they joked grimly to each other later—came out to Twentynine Palms to die, and then spent some 50 or more mostly very pleasant years getting around to it. The desert gave them those years, they believed. And the man they

credited with finding them their desert and its new lease on life for them was Dr. James B. Luckie.

Before World War I, Dr. Luckie served as a resident physician at La Vina Sanitarium in Pasadena. Persons with consumption, asthma, and other lung problems, had been sent into the Southwest for a number of years. A dry, hot climate with clear air benefited most of them. Treatment for such patients, in then smog-free Pasadena, was the specialty of La Vina. During World War I, Dr. Luckie served as an Army medical officer. He knew what many of these men had suffered in France during gas attacks; and he was well aware that tuberculosis of the lungs—consumption—had spread considerably among servicemen billeted in close quarters during their military service. Many such afflicted veterans began turning up in Pasadena after the war, and Dr. Luckie, along with an American Legion post in that city, attacked their problems with vigor and compassion.

As has been noted, the precise dates of early settlers encouraged by Dr. Luckie and American Legion Post 13 are not at hand, but it is clear that a very wide

*William E. Keys, one of the early settlers of the high desert country, poses at his Desert Queen Ranch House, now part of the 577,000-acre Joshua Tree National Monument.*

National Park Service Photo 275-324



area of the Mojave and California deserts were explored for such a settlement site by Dr. Luckie and the commander of Post 13, Joe Davis, who himself suffered from tuberculosis. Finally, near the border between those two desert regions:

One night they camped under the Twentynine Palms of the Oasis of Mara. In the morning Dr. Luckie walked out into the sunshine. The air sparkled. The elevation was right. Summer heat would be bearable, the winters mild. The long basin, surrounded by bare mountains, would not seem desolate to anyone who had eyes for beauty of color and form . . . . And in this valley, a man could homestead a quarter-section of land and make a home—and perhaps find values to heal the spirit while health returned. Dr. Luckie began to tell patients, “Go out to Twentynine Palms and file on a homestead.”<sup>11</sup>

Joe Davis (for whom there is a street named in Twentynine Palms) did file on a homestead, and came to Twentynine Palms with a small caravan of cars loaded with the material to start his cabin. A short time later, his exposure to a desert rain contributed to his getting pneumonia, and he died only a few months after he had filed on the homestead. But in the meantime, his American Legion post had started a veterans’ rest home in the area, and by the fall of 1928, there were enough veterans to create a Legion post of their own, Out Post 334.

Another Legionnaire, Frank Mathys, took over the homestead filing of Joe Davis, and improved on it. In 1930, Mathys deeded 100 acres to the Legion post. Earlier, Bill Campbell had given 40 acres of his homestead to Dr. Luckie—either because he was the doctor who had sent him to Twentynine Palms in 1924, or for later services—and Dr. Luckie, who made it a rule not to charge disabled veterans for his services, gave this land to the Legion post. All of this later became the Legion rest home, post headquarters and later temporary school, community hall, and—a portion of it—the park which took Dr. Luckie’s name to commemorate what he had done for the community.

There were earlier settlers in Twentynine Palms than Dr. Luckie’s veterans. In 1910, Bill Keys arrived to mine and to found a ranch, a family, and a legend of pioneering which still is talked about in Twentynine Palms and at the crumbling site of his ranch house in what is now the National Monument.\*

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\*Helen Bagley tells of Bill Keys in her *Sand In My Shoe*. Art Kidwell, a former National Park Ranger at the Monument and now a filmmaker, relates in *Ambush: The Story of Bill Keys* (Fresno: Pioneer Publishing Co., 1979) an excellent account of a dramatic episode in Keys’ later years, and his tenacious efforts which ultimately cleared his name and freed him from a sentence for manslaughter. *Ambush* can be found in the Twentynine Palms library.

The Donnels, Norman and Betnice, arrived in 1922, as did George and Mildred Michels. Donnell Hill, at the west edge of “downtown” Twentynine Palms, is named for Norm Donnell; and Robert Michels, a brother of George, has lived with his wife Beulah on the Michels’ homestead in Twentynine Palms into the mid-1980s. In 1923, William Q. Smith and his younger brother, Harry, homesteaded; later, Bill Smith developed the Smith’s Ranch complex on Adobe Road. A large building there, first a roller-skating rink, later was used by Marines in the early 1950s as a gymnasium for physical training, and for Special Services events. A drive-in theater—open air—remained an active part of the complex into modern times. Also in 1923, David and Anna Poste arrived to attempt a revival of the Virginia Dale mine, had money and legal problems, left, but came back later to become important persons in the community. Dave Poste became justice of the peace, for many terms in that role, and both “manned” the first telephone exchange in their home in Twentynine Palms.<sup>12\*\*</sup>

On the fifth of July 1965, Frank and Helen Bagley took Dr. Luckie and his daughter, Susan Moore, “for a picnic in the desert mountains where yuccas were blooming gloriously.”<sup>13</sup> Helen reports that the doctor was then “an old man with a bad heart.” He was to die a short time later. But on that day Dr. Luckie said, “if they should ever want to put a monument to me in the park, I hope it will be a simple boulder with these lines: “Here far from noise and turmoil may brotherly love prevail.”<sup>14</sup> Then Helen closes that chapter with these words:

Noise and turmoil? From the days of the first town meetings when people parked their cars in a circle and sat on running boards, there has been noise and turmoil. But there has been love too. And I think this has prevailed.<sup>15</sup>

So it took the disabled veterans of World War I—the “lungers”—to follow Dr. Luckie’s star into the desert and found a center to the community. Perhaps they did not come to the desert to get organized, either, but cooperation became a necessity for those weakened men, most of whom had incomes of less than \$100 a month. Thus, in a remote desert where one could scarcely arrive by accident, “community” really arrived that way.

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\*\*Helen Bagley, in *Sand In My Shoe*, provides a touching account of these early days in Twentynine Palms, in her chapter devoted to Dave and Anna Poste.

## CHAPTER 3

# Condor Field

If organization and “government” for the community of Twentynine Palms began with the formation of the American Legion post at Dr. Luckie’s “health camp” in the fall of 1928, most of the refinements of modern civilization still were a long way off. As one old settler has said, the Wall Street crash a year later, and the Great Depression which followed in the 1930s hardly changed anything in Twentynine Palms. If the entire nation got badly down at the heel in the Depression, most dwellers in Twentynine Palms just started practicing a bit earlier for this sort of life. Population did increase slowly, however, as the Depression drove some from the cities into the desert where they hoped to live more economically on a jackrabbit homestead, or by trying their luck with a small gold-mining operation.

To report on the slow arrival of the niceties of civilization, William J. Underhill, who had been an early homesteader (in 1928) with friend Les Eatenfight, brought his linotype machine into Twentynine Palms and in April of 1935 founded *The Desert Trail*, first local newspaper authorized to accept legal advertising. Bill Underhill, who later was to claim for himself and his Legion friends the “B.A. degree” because they were in Twentynine Palms “Before Anything,” was for years a familiar sight in the town, taking notes on envelopes and other scraps of paper, and transposing them later into news stories and features directly into hot type at his linotype.\*

Until 1936, the way in remained desert roads—rutted tracks in the decomposed granite “sand,” with numerous rocks and an intermixed natural content of adobe providing what firmness there was. That year, San Bernardino County road department workers oiled the first 20 miles of Twentynine Palms “highway” from Whitewater eastward. Not yet the later “desert mix” which created almost an asphalt or “blacktop” road, this oil merely helped lay the dust, and assisted the natural adobe in holding the surface together a bit

\*Underhill, a veteran of World War I, sold his newspaper in 1951, and thereafter there were other changes before the paper came under its present ownership as part of a nationwide chain. Oldtimers say the paper never was as much fun after Bill Underhill sold it. Underhill remained a loved and respected resident of Twentynine Palms until his death in January 1984, at the age of 84.

better. Twenty miles got the road up the Morongo Grade, and to the first plateau of the high desert of the Morongo Basin. Still ahead to the east was the next long grade, up to what is now Yucca Valley. Oil on this surface, and then the firmer desert mix did not come along until a few years later. In 1952, when Marines first came to open the base, the blacktop road still was but two lanes, and it stopped at Twentynine Palms. It was not until 1959 that hard surface moved eastward beyond Twentynine Palms and the old Dale mining community to the Colorado River. Now four-laned all the way from I-10 at Whitewater to Twentynine Palms, the blacktop remains only two lanes on east to the river. But this does not keep it from being a weekend and holiday racecourse for recreational vehicles (RVs) and boat pullers streaking to and from the river.

Improved roads always are a mixed blessing for pioneers since roads often bring an unwanted rush of “civilization,” and such was the case for Twentynine Palms. Yet some of the “problems” caused by the improved roads also brought the community a new neighbor, the quiet giant of the Joshua Tree National Monument which sprawls along most of the south edge of the Morongo Basin. This is the National Park Service’s huge “island” of conservation in a desert which always looked a bit worthless and lacking in claims for its own life and survival to rather a lot of thoughtless and unscrupulous sightseers and other exploiters. For a time, as better roads and automobiles allowed more and more people to explore what in their view was the land nobody owned, it appeared most desert plants, including exotic cacti, might be uprooted and taken to desert gardens then becoming all the rage in the growing cities and suburbs down toward the Pacific.

Primary champion for the formation of the National Park Service conservation area which became the Joshua Tree National Monument was Mrs. Albert Sherman Hoyt—for whom there is a street named in Twentynine Palms. After genteel upbringing in the midst of her plantation family in Mississippi in the days of the Civil War and later, she married a “wealthy New York surgeon and moved to California in the late 1890s.”<sup>1</sup>

After World War I, during which she lost an infant son and later her husband, Minerva Hoyt explored and became interested in the California desert. To publicize the plight of the desert at the hands of thoughtless collectors, she staged desert plant exhibits in New York and England, as well as in the American west. In 1930, she formed the International Deserts Conservation League, and through it began to put focus to her plan to have the National Park Service create a desert park in southern California. The New Deal and conservation work projects of President Franklin D. Roosevelt brought about conditions which caused the creation of the Joshua Tree National Monument on 10 August 1936, by Presidential proclamation.

The area contained approximately 825,000 acres; Twentynine Palms donated land around the old oasis for park headquarters; and in the fall of 1940, James E. Cole came down from the National Park at Yosemite to become first superintendent of the sprawling desert acres of Joshua Tree.\*\* The region, with just a few campgrounds and picnic areas, remains essentially an unspoiled and trackless desert preserve popular with Marines on duty at the base as relaxation, hiking, and climbing country. For those Marines not familiar with the desert and the American West, the National Monument provides a wonder of new experiences.

The Joshua tree—actually a member of the lily family and not a “tree” of the annual-growth-ring type—got its name, probably, from early Mormons in the American West. They thought, so the story goes, that the plant—at least the young ones with two arms—resembled the biblical Joshua, imploring the heavens. Older Joshua trees can grow to 10, 20, or more feet tall with a magnificent spread of spiky, contorted limbs.

Creation of the Joshua Tree National Monument, improved surface for the Morongo grade, and then—chanticleer of progress—expanded telephone service at Twentynine Palms, made the year 1936 a banner one, indeed. While in Europe Hitler and Mussolini signed their Berlin-Rome Axis alliance, and in the Far East Japan continued to stir troubled waters along the

China Coast, residents of Twentynine Palms—as with most other U.S. citizens—continued to struggle out of the Great Depression. But as has been noted, in Twentynine Palms, it was difficult to tell where the rub of pioneering left off and chafing of Depression

If there had been but two toll phones in all of the community prior to 1936—which was the case—this had been accepted as part of the facts of the matter. But now in this historic year, early pioneer Frank Bagley led the appeals which caused the California Water and Telephone Company to start expanding the telephone service to businesses and homes. This is when the telephone exchange was set up in the home of David and Anna Poste. At first, the switchboard could handle five connections. Dial phone did not come along until 1953, when a new building went up to house the improved service. Until then, telephone users cranked for central, and then asked for the connection they wanted.

It was at this switchboard that early resident Blanche Ellis one evening had to sit and efficiently follow through on her “number, please” response to local phone calls while a man and wife brought in by Constable Poste because of a domestic squabble, and shackled to the Poste couch, pretty well shredded the clothing from each other in front of Blanche and her switchboard. Blanche also adds the following to the legend of the Joshua tree: she once heard a woman of her acquaintance tell a newcomer to the desert that “the Joshua trees are ten thousand and ten years old.” “How can you be so precise?” Blanche asked her later. “Because,” said the amateur botany reporter, “when we came out here, somebody told us they were ten thousand years old, and we’ve been here ten years now.”

In 1938 came the U.S. Small Tract Act, which provided for the five-acre “jackrabbit” homesteads and launched a “flood” of new claims which before long dotted the desert landscape with prove-up cabins. Old timers considered these something of a blight. Residency requirements were more relaxed than had been the case when homesteads amounted (usually) to a quarter section (a square half-mile measured from a section corner).\*\* For claiming a small tract, one need

\*\*The Joshua Tree National Monument area is California desert country representative of both the Colorado and Mojave deserts, which merge within its boundaries. It is typical of that portion of the desert region of the southwest known as the Basin and Range Province. For this reason, it has great geological interest. The relief of the area is due to extensive block faulting by which large sections of the earth's crust have been broken, tilted, and raised. The resulting remarkable rock formation, deep canyons and broad basins provide magnificent scenic beauty.” (Greene, *Historical Resource Study*, p. 375).

\*\*In those earlier days the claimant—single or head of a household—had to live on the homestead at least seven months a year for three years, and he had to construct an habitable house in the first year. A World War I veteran could apply certain of his military duty time toward the residency requirements. Helen Bagley quotes early settlers as saying that “The government bets you 160 acres of land that you can't live on it for three years without starving to death.” The claimant often lost. Helen reports that most claims “had been filed three times before being finally patented.” (*Jawed In My Shoe*, p. 119)



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A357595

*Created in 1936, the Joshua Tree National Monument sought to preserve stands of picturesque Joshua trees and an astonishing array of high desert plants and animals.*

only build a cabin, and weekend use was enough to qualify for full and final ownership. Blight or not, the jackrabbit tract cabins contributed something to population growth, and something to the economy as well. A "flood" of newcomers, it seemed to many of those persons who had arrived earlier.

Another flood problem with which Twentynine Palms struggled from 1939 and into the 1980s, had to do with desert downpours and resulting flash floods. Early settler William B. Hatch, Jr., engineer-surveyor, gave his services to flood control during these years, as did Frank Bagley and other members of the community. Bagley in those early days was president of a property owners' league, and most efforts concentrated on getting bank loans and rights of way for construction of flood control channels.\*

Yet a third flood—a violent military one—began to form in 1939. It would bring an end to the Great

Depression for all of the United States, and would bring for Twentynine Palms a new role as a site for a military training area. The infamous Munich Conference had taken place in September of 1938; in the summer of 1939, Stalin signed a non-aggression pact with Hitler; and on 1 September 1939, Hitler sent his mechanized forces into Poland. World War II was underway. Although President Roosevelt issued a proclamation of neutrality, most U.S. citizens who remembered World War I knew that could not last. It didn't. A new Neutrality Act passed both houses of the U.S. Congress during November of 1939, but allowed sort of a "come and get it" for "cash on the barrelhead" sale of war materials to the Allies.<sup>2</sup>

"Goodbye, dear, I'll be back in a year" tilted the popular (and hopeful) song of the day when, based on the U.S. Selective Service Training Act of September 1940, young men began registering for the first

\*In the early years—before anything, as Bill Underhill termed it—Twentyniners made their own fun and relaxation. Sally Ince (whose father-in-law Thomas H. Ince was an early Hollywood producer) tells of the sometimes activity when rains came rumbling into the desert. They'd get their folding chairs, Sally says, and hur-

ry to a strategic spot where they could watch the flash floods go by. In those days, parties were where you found them. Progress ended that pastime. A modern problem remaining has been that of keeping motorcycle riders (some of them Marines) out of the channels and off the adjacent berms during dry times.



Department of Defense Photo (USAF) AC21891A

*Numerous TG-2 gliders appear in line near the hangar at the Army Air Forces' glider training facility at Twentynine Palms, California, during the early years of World War II.*

peacetime military conscription in the nation's history and were soon going off to military training camps. President Roosevelt in November was swept back into office for an unprecedented third term. The nation was ready to do its share. More aid to the Allies became possible in January 1941 with passage of the "lend-lease" bill. U.S. military forces, with their new "draftees," began locating and constructing new training sites. In November 1941, Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson reached out and touched Twentynine Palms. He signed authority for the U.S. Army Air Corps to start a glider training school on those old dead lakes north of Dr. Luckie's health camp, where the World War I veterans—and a growing number of others—were learning to live in good health beside the Oasis of Mara where you had to arrive on purpose, and stay with conviction.

For some time in Twentynine Palms there had been dreams of an airfield north of town. In spite of the fact that aviation had played a role in World War I, and that Frank Bagley and others had been a part of that war-time activity, flying had to struggle to find its niche after the war. The adventure it promised continued to attract experimentation with new uses, however, and part of the early Twentynine Palms idea—in 1937—was to show off the desert with air tours, since automobile tours had become popular as a means for city folks to see the quaint outback. The town Chamber of Commerce, sparked by Bagley, Earle H. Nicholes, and Colonel Henry L. "Watty" Watson, made application to the U.S. Department of Interior

to lease a large tract of land north of town, at a site called Mesquite Dry Lake. Obstacles between lease and actual airfield were many. There was no road to the dry lake, no electricity, and no resources for meaningful construction.\* Flying enthusiasts hoped to get help from President Roosevelt's Works Projects Administration (WPA), but this was not forthcoming. By 1939, the plans for the flying field crumpled in for lack of wherewithal

Next notion for the dry lake was land yachting and sailplaning—gliding. Early settler William B. Hatch, Jr., a water sports enthusiast in his pre-desert days, organized a Twentynine Palms Land Yacht Club. Lucile Weight reports that approximately 100 persons attended the first meeting, and that in following months many land yachters visited Mesquite Dry Lake with their wheeled "sailboats." And, according to this same local historian, national gliding champion John Robinson "brought his ship here and talked of the possibilities of a glider school." That was in November of 1941, and later that month, as we have seen, the Army Air Forces got authority to establish just such a school in Twentynine Palms—a military glider school which would send airborne troops into World War II battlefields.

Earlier that year the Germans had given a grim new

\*A private entrepreneur, Leonard Wikoff, brought in generators in 1938, and over the next year began stringing an electrical grid to homes and businesses from his gasoline-powered operation near Four Corners, which is at the intersection of Twentynine Palms Highway and Adobe Road. Except for a few earlier private "light plants," this was the community's first electricity.

significance to gliders by using them in their 20 May invasion of Crete in the eastern Mediterranean. Ironically, the Germans had pioneered the construction of gliders and the development of military tactics for these motorless aircraft because of weapons restrictions imposed on them in the post World War I Treaty of Versailles (1919). Gliders were economical (and for the Germans, legal) airframes. German students at the University of Aachen in 1920 built a sporting glider—the *Schwarzer Teufel*—which had been designed by their professor, Dr. Wolfgang Klemperer (whom we shall meet again). This Black Devil of the sky proved so successful that craft of its design, and others later, inspired large-scale sporting events throughout Germany and spread gliding into many other countries, including the United States. In 1928 and 1929—at about the time Twentynine Palms was getting organized around its American Legion outpost—a few German pilots set up a glider school at Cape Cod. And it was a German, Wolf Hirth, who in 1930 taught glider fans about thermals and paved the way for the wide-spread use of the variometer which “reads” the thermals for the glider pilot.\*

Hirth “discovered” thermals, according to the Soaring Society of America, in 1930 at the first U.S. Na-

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\*Technically, *gliding* is a steady downward flight or glide, and was the first application of the “motorless airplane.” An understanding of thermals turned the sport into soaring which makes possible sustained flight in a motorless and heavier-than-air craft. A thermal is an updraft of warm air caused by the uneven heating of the earth’s surface brought about by terrain configuration, ground cover, etc. A pilot in a “glider” rides a thermal upward by circling or spiraling on its lift; then when it plays out, the pilot glides downward in the desired direction until he encounters another thermal which can give him new lift for a subsequent glide. Also, an “upslope lift” can result when a prevailing wind rises at a hill or ridge line, and gliders can gain elevation on these currents and soar along the upslope lift much as a surfer would run along a wave. In addition—and usually a thing of mountain country—there is “wave lift” brought about by wave-like disturbances in a briskly moving air mass downwind of a mountain range. In early days of gliders, the variometer consisted of a chamber, called the “jug,” providing a static source of air, to which two tubes are connected. One tube shows a red ball, the other a green ball. The red ball rising in its tube meant the glider was losing altitude; the green ball rising indicated that the glider was gaining altitude. Thus, sailplane pilots airborne and practicing the art of soaring say they are “looking for green air.” The military tactic involved mainly the glide technique. Military gliders were pulled aloft by mother aircraft, and then released at such an altitude and range that they could glide into landing zones in the target area. In addition to quietness, just about their only advantages were that they could built in less time—and for less money—than motorized aircraft and that they could land in less space. Parachute tactics later proved more useful in military operations. Military helicopters of workhorse value did not come along until much later—generally speaking, in the Korean War in the 1950s.

tional Soaring Contest, at Elmira, New York. The Soaring Society was incorporated at Elmira in 1932, and that area—along with Twentynine Palms—was one of three primary military glider schools established by the United States during those early days of World War II. The other was at Lockport, Illinois.\*\*

First order of business for the new airfield was a proper land survey. Bill Hatch, who earlier had organized dry land sailing in this dead lake area, volunteered for this project. Hatch, a surveyor, was a natural for this. Years earlier, suffering as a young man with arthritis, he had been weekending in Twentynine Palms when somebody came to the Inn looking for the surveyor who was supposed to be in town. An early settler had died. Another settler had given a plot of land for a cemetery, but nobody was quite sure of the location. If Bill Hatch could find the proper land, friends of the deceased could bury him. Bill Hatch did, and they did. Now Hatch called on the Army with F. R. Whyers, who wanted to build the glider facility. Later that month—November 1941—the Army Corps of Engineers sent out a survey team of its own.

In charge was Technical Sergeant Steven Zvonar, who came down from the 29th Engineer Topographic Battalion in Portland, picked up some additional personnel from Field Company A, then in Oceanside, and came out to the desert—about a half dozen Army engineers in all. Zvonar, who later went into the Air Force, from which he retired as a major, recalled in 1985 that to beat the desert heat, he and his crew would move out of the bivouac at about 0400, do their mapping, and then at about 1500 head back to the village—then comprised of about 300 or 400 people, it seemed to him.

They had a favorite bar in Twentynine. But the first afternoon or two, they found the place crowded “with the ladies on the bar stools and the men two deep” behind them. Zvonar’s instrument man, a Blackfoot Indian, solved the problem of getting the soldiers up to the bar. He had a “pet” tarantula he’d found in the desert, named it Methuselah, and kept it in an empty kitchen matches box. Sergeant Buckland, the Blackfoot with a sense of humor and a flair for practical jokes, reached over the crowd and released Methuselah onto the bar. “Well, needless to say,” Zvonar nonetheless said, “women fell off bar stools, screamed, ran.” Buckland and the other soldiers moved up to the bar and “made their presence known!”

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\*\*Areas of rolling hills and valleys, where thermals climb. Lockport, up toward Chicago, got its name from its position on the old Illinois and Michigan canal. Elmira, south of Seneca Lake, straddles the valley of the Chemung.

"From then on, we were always greeted by 'Here's the Army!' " said Zvonar. "We were treated royally for the three weeks we were there. A most memorable time in my life."\* From the work of Zvonar and his men came multi-colored topographic quadrangles, and triangulation stations from which aeronautical engineers were able to locate the light beacons for the airfield, as well as other survey reference points.

All of this was bringing the military to Twentynine Palms. Ultimately this meant the U.S. Marine Corps. While there is no way to prove it, probably the Marine Corps never would have come to Twentynine Palms had it not been for this 1941 decision to put the glider base here in these dead lakes surrounded by their brown hills of thermals and upslope lifts. There was by then an air base at Victorville—now George Air Force Base. Later, the Marine Corps set up the driest outdoor warehouse in the world at Barstow, and the Marine Corps Air Station at Yuma later came to be as a result of needs for emergency landing sites inland from San Diego and around the impact areas in the vicinity of the Salton Sea.

And then for desert training on the ground (something the Marine Corps might have inherited later), up for grabs after World War II might have been the great, sprawling acres of decomposed granite churned up by General George Patton's tanks (and those of others who followed) east of Twentynine Palms and on over into equally ghastly areas of Arizona. Desert Training Center, it was called. It amounted to some 16,000 square miles of desert, from areas east of Twentynine Palms, and then eastward throughout much of the vacant desert between what are now Highways 40 (old Route 66) in the north to I-10 in the south, then across the Colorado River and into a broad Arizona desert area from Parker in the north to Yuma in the south. Patton began training his tankers there in the spring of 1942, and then left in early fall to make his 8 November 1942 landing in North Africa with his 3d and 9th Infantry Divisions and his 2d Armored Division.

Training for tank units and individual soldiers continued in the California-Arizona areas until 1944, and Bureau of Land Management personnel who now own

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\*This was the age—and the sort of a place—where, as Kipling said of another time and place, a man could raise a thirst. Major General Bud Schmid said that when he first arrived in the desert as the young supply officer for the Marine facility in 1953, a desert martini was a cold beer in an icy mug, with an olive plunked in. Sgt. Buckland, the Blackfoot, by the way, knew that tarantulas are not dangerous. Repulsively scary to most of us, but not dangerous. The scorpion, the black widow, the brown recluse—now those are different matters. Especially the brown recluse.

the old center say that in all some 300,000 U.S. troops trained here during the war. Most of them must have made rocklined walkways around their tents and up and down company streets. Even now in the mid-1980s, flying over or driving through with a rugged vehicle, these pathways of rocks can be seen. And still in evidence also are some fieldstone altars and walls in the form of Gothic arches where various units had their chaplains conduct outdoor services. Those and a (now-crumbling) gigantic relief map about the size of a football field, built to represent the sprawling acres of the training center, are all that remain.

Early in 1985, the Needles office of the Bureau of Land Management sponsored the dedication of a commemorative monument to this gigantic military training effort, at arid and windswept Chiriaco Summit, just off Route I-10 and near the southernmost border of the Joshua Tree National Monument, where the Cottonwood, Eagle, and Orocopia Mountains scowl down at modern motorists speeding along in air-conditioned comfort. If these motorists squint searchingly into the heat shimmers of the brown and desolate desert, still they will see nothing to remind them of those days of training. Not even a self-respecting ghost would remain. Out of sight from the motorway, only the relief map, and the lonely altars remain, along with those lines of rocks. A future lithic wonder, a Carnac in miniature?\*\*\* These rows of desert field stones led, in their fashion, to North Africa, to Sicily, to Salerno, to Nice, to Normandy, to victory in World War II.

After the decision in 1941 to locate the glider training center at Twentynine Palms, one of the advisors who visited this desert area a number of times was Dr. Wolfgang Klemperer, designer of that famous *Schwarzer Teufel* built by his students in Aachen more than 20 years earlier. He had fled Hitler's Germany, and by this time, was a research engineer for Douglass Aircraft.

Other visitors were frequent, since gliders and the desert both were oddities which attracted attention. Lois Marlow Harz, a Twentynine Palms resident who came home from San Bernardino College and went to work in the Army office at the field, recalls that one day movie star—and by then lieutenant—Jimmy Stewart flew in to look the place over. Mrs. Harz recalled in 1985 that she was so thrilled at the prospect of seeing the popular movie star that she immediate-

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\*\*\*Carnac is in France, on Brittany's south coast, and is where there are located thousands of huge and rough gray granite megaliths, some of them up to 18 feet tall, standing on end and arranged in long lines forming avenues—something of a "low-tech Stonehenge," and likewise of a purpose unknown to modern man.



Department of Defense Photo (USAF) AC21888

*Preflight classroom instruction in the principles of motorless flight was part of the four-week course involving 30 hours of flying which qualified participants as glider pilots.*

ly activated her once-a-day chore of going from office to office with mail call, in hopes that she would encounter the lieutenant from Hollywood. At each stop she managed just to miss him, and at her final mail call visit someone pointed out to her Stewart's plane speeding down the dusty runway for takeoff.

And Gwyn Keys—a daughter-in-law of that old pioneer and goldminer Bill Keys—one day not only saw a popular star of the day, Jackie Coogan, but got volunteer assistance from him on a morning when a schedule foulup caused her to be the only worker on hand to open the Condor Field canteen. Coogan, who had played the orphan adopted by Charlie Chaplin in *The Kid*, Chaplin's first feature-length film, was now a staff sergeant instructor at the glider base.<sup>4</sup>

The Twentynine Palms Air Academy began as a contract operation with a civilian firm organized to build, maintain, and operate the glider facility for the Army Air Forces. President of the firm, and the on-site manager, was F. R. Whyers. First commanding officer of the Army contingent was Captain Lester C. Hess; later Captain Hadley B. Elikor became the commanding officer. On the military staff were about 50 officers and men, including flight instructors and co-pilots who rode with the students until they were ready to solo. Some of the flight instructors and co-pilots also were civilians. Vinton Harz, an early student lucky enough to catch Lois Marlow on the rebound from her

shattering experience of being stood up by Jimmy Stewart, recalls that in 1942, there were perhaps "half a dozen" civilians on Whyers' staff, and a small additional number of civilians in a security force, a maintenance section, and so forth. Major Zvonar remembered in 1985 that when he and his crew surveyed and mapped the field in 1941, there appeared to be only a few civilians there. They wore some sort of a "bronze crescent" ornament on their caps, but had rank designations equivalent to colonel down to lieutenant.\*

The military side was the 17th Army Air Forces Flying Training Detachment. The War Department put out a press release on 27 November 1941, to announce the training would begin on or about 1 January 1942, with an initial class of 12 students. Two weeks later a class of 18 was to start the four-week course. Thereafter, said the War Department, classes of 24 persons each will be enrolled every two weeks.

Early on, those who had previous power-plane licenses—the ones the Army sought at the outset—

\*Harz, in early 1942 a staff sergeant (later a flight officer), said that he and other enlisted trainees were told to salute these civilians with their devised ranks. Damned if we will, said these salty soldiers, most of whom were in training because they had enough moxie to have earned private pilot licenses before the war. Salute the uniform, suggested an Army instructor. Vinton Harz said he would if it were hung up over there in the corner. The kind of spirit which won the war!

were to graduate after an average of 30 hours of instruction in gliders of the two-place TG-1 and TG-2 types. These were the same Frankfort and Schweizer models to be used also at the primary glider schools at Elmira and Lockport.

At this pace, over 600 pilots could be graduated per year, but local records and memories are not clear on this subject and retired records, now in the hands of the Air Force, are sparse. There was not always good weather, even in the desert which had been a health camp. Characteristic desert winds in some of the cool months hampered operations; and desert rains, which can hit with violence in the fall and with a little more even temper in winter, sometimes made the old dry lakes too wet for takeoffs and landings.

But those were heady days—finally getting to do something which was preparing to get back at Hitler in Europe, or the Japanese out there in the Pacific. Gliders, “a hell of a way to go to war,” said the Twentynine Palms base chief of staff in the summer of 1985, and he a private pilot and a glider sportsman in the bargain.

Vinton Harz, though, still would not say a bad word against them. He was here from summer into December of 1942. Part of the time he worked the Link trainer for the staff, a job he’d had at the air base at Victorville before an officer there sold him on the glider deal, because it would make a flight officer out of him. Originally from Minnesota, Harz was strongly eligible for gliders because before military service he had earned private pilot wings.

Vinton Harz remembers the training as many moments of exhilarating flying interspersed with hot drudgery and some frustrating times. One of the latter occurred when someone in authority told him to

land on a desolate dry lake, and then seemed to forget that he was there.

But you tried to get the last training flights of the day, Harz said. Then you got to stay up a bit longer. Free time, almost. And you could catch those upslope lifts along those little mountains which are behind where the mainside buildings of the Marine base now stand. You could fly those lifts along the ridge, and then turn back into green air and come back along the ridge again and again. An eternal “wave” surfers only dream of.

Harz remembers one day when there were 12 to 14 of them soaring along that ridge. Another day, he was up to almost 14,000 feet on thermals before he decided he had better get back down to the hot and dusty field.

A hell of a way to go to war? Vinton Harz did it three times, and then came back to Lois and to Twentynine Palms where they raised their family. For a time, Vint had a service station, and then he joined the Postal Service. For a number of years, he worked at the post office on the Marine base, and then he moved to the main office in town. Once, during his employment on the Marine base, he told an inquiring reporter from *The Observation Post* that he never met a Marine he didn’t like. “But,” he added, “I came close two or three times.” He retired from the Postal Service in 1985.

Forty-one years prior to this Postal Service retirement, in another spring, Vint co-piloted a glider into Normandy. It was a big British Horsa, carrying something like 39 troops and equipment. They crashed—with considerable help from the German defenders. It was almost dark; wartime, double-double daylight saving time still had not saved them enough, but

*Three gliders being towed by a single aircraft take off from the Army airfield at Twentynine Palms; all will be released from the tow line at altitudes of 4,000 feet or more.*

Department of Defense Photo (USAF) AC2553



bright flashes of fire from their designated landing areas convinced them that the enemy had come to wait for them there. The British pilot turned for an alternate site, but there was more enemy fire, and then tall poles put up as counter-landing obstacles. Vinton Harz came to on the ground, wearing the Horsa on his back. A near-fatal way to try to get along with a Horsa. The flight officer from Twentynine Palms' Condor Field could not walk. After much pain and other misadventures, he was rescued and evacuated back across the Channel to England, where he recovered in a hospital.

For getting well again, he got to fly his own glider into Eindhoven, Holland, in September 1944 for the Market Garden operation. Later, the Dutch gave him an award for his part in that. Then, in March 1945, he flew another glider into the Wesel operation on the Rhine. The United States by this time had given up trying to salvage gliders after such operations. Too often booby trapped. After you landed, you changed from being an Army flight officer to being an Army ground officer. After the landing at Wesel, Vint did the required thing to his big troop glider—which was something like what you did for a horse with a broken leg—and then led a ground attack across a field toward a tree line where the Germans waited. For that, he got a Bronze Star Medal. "Gliding was all right as long as I got to be the pilot," Vinton Harz said in 1985.

After gliders, Condor Field became "just another" Army Air Corps flight training school, with motor-powered planes. By early 1943, the glider training began to wind down. There had been shocking evidence in combat operations that gliders too often were serious crashes waiting to happen. Parachute operations turned out to be more effective airborne techniques. March 1943 seems to have marked the last month for

glider flights at Condor Field. J. B. Carroll, after World War II a land developer and real estate broker in Twentynine Palms and the Morongo Basin, recalls that he came to Condor Field in those early weeks of 1943 to fly motorized planes; and Gwyn Keys, who with the one-time assistance of Jackie Coogan helped operate the canteen at the field, recalls that all hands were invited to take a glider ride before those craft were crated for shipment elsewhere.

After that, the 17th Army Air Forces Flying Training Detachment continued for about a year with radial engine Stearman trainers. Then, a bit later in 1944, the Navy took over.

Great expanses of the desert, from the Mexican border northward, were gunnery and bombing ranges for the Navy. It had fields and auxiliary fields from Yuma northward along the Salton Sea, and elsewhere in the region. Condor Field became part of this string. The Navy hung on in Twentynine Palms until summer of 1945, when World War II ended.

First, after that, Condor Field went into caretaker status. Then, before the year was out, the place was given over to San Bernardino county. For seven years the silent buildings stood vacant beside the dusty old airfield. Gold miners began again to traipse through the ancient brown hills and atroyos. Nonetheless, it looked as if the desert would finally win, after all. The desert and the descendants of Sergeant Buckland's tarantula which once helped the military enter the warm social swirl of Twentynine Palms.

And the name, Condor Field? Did condors once soar along those brown hills in the upslope lifts? "No," said an old time glider man. "Not that we know of. We named it that because we admired those birds. Best flying machine ever created."

## CHAPTER 4

# The Marines Arrive

*She's a Yip! Yip! Yip-py-eye dolly,  
A new kind of gal of the west.  
And Yip! Yip! Yip-py-by golly!  
Whatever she does she does the best.  
She got twenty-nine di'mond rings.  
Got 'em without any strings.  
She's a dynamite dreamboat,  
A load of atom bombs,  
The Lady from Twentynine Palms!*

Well, World War II was over, and you *had* to sing something. Allie Wrubel and wife Wanda, along with young sons Robert and Thomas, were living in the Campbell house, that two-story fieldstone showplace Bill and Betty Campbell built after Betty came into her inheritance. One of the boys wanted his father to write a song for an affair at school. "After all, dad had done the score for Walt Disney's *Song of the South* ["Zip-a-dee-doodah, Zip-a-dee-ay, My O My, what a wonderful day"] and dozens of other well-known hits of the early and later '40s." And thus, published in 1947 by the Freddie Martin Publishing Company, was born "The Lady from Twentynine Palms." It became a novelty hit and—said Sally Ince—"really put us on the map."\*

Maybe that song was not the highest mark there ever was, but it illustrates the point that there had almost always been a bit of a show business flavor to Twentynine Palms, perhaps because of that old Legion post in Pasadena being so close to Hollywood and Beverly Hills where the movie industry grew up. James Cagney had a home in Twentynine Palms from the 1930s into at least the mid-1980s, although by 1985 he had not visited for some time. Cagney was a friend

of John W. Hilton, desert artist and author whose paintings always have been much sought after by those who come to know and enjoy the desert.\*\*

Other actors who had connections with Twentynine Palms over the years included Ralph Bellamy, Will Rogers, Jr., and swimming and movie star Esther Williams, whose brother Dave Williams was for years everybody's favorite plumber in town until in the late 1970s, Dave and his wife Virginia were lured away to the bright lights of Yucca Valley. Virginia kept a branch of her travel business in Twentynine Palms, however. Local historian Lucile Weight finds in her research on the latter-day homesteading in the area that in 1945 Ronald Reagan—later to be governor of California and then President of the United States—was included in a batch of Hollywood types who filed on a large tract east of town where they hoped to establish a flying club near an emergency landing field. This field later became a San Bernardino county airfield, known locally as "Twentynine Palms International." The plans of Reagan and his associates failed, however, because of water problems. Later the Knott family, of Knott's Berry Farm fame, established a sky park not far west of the downtown areas of the village. And in the 1980s, comedian Red Skelton was a frequent visitor. Twentynine Palms had been home for his wife for a number of years, and her mother still had a home here in the mid-1980s.

And although we tend to "name drop" the names of entertainers and public officials, most of them were in Twentynine Palms merely to enjoy the peace, quiet, and climate; for the most part they were left alone dur-

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\*Long-distance telephone operators, especially, found it difficult to tune in on "Twentynine Palms." They would demand: "Yes, but what town is it?" For a time, Freddie Martin helped, as did others who sang Allie Wrubel's song: the Andrew Sisters among them. Later, the same old identity crisis cropped up again—novelty songs like old soldiers always fade away. Now machines have trouble with the name of the town, often tacking "29" onto the end of the Post Office box number, or the street address, and then making the next line of the address read "Palms, CA." And calling in an order to a catalog sales outfit—or even to a department store in our very own state of California—often presents a problem. "You mean that's the name of the town?" Quite so. And the purists among us want the number spelled out, and all one word: Twentynine.

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\*\*Perhaps Hilton's best-known book was *Sonora Sketch Book* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), which was republished in 1966 by BestWest Publications, Palm Desert, California. Many of his excellent early paintings hang in Twentynine Palms homes with families whom John Hilton bartered with for his rather meager existence during the Great Depression and other early years of his art. Helen Bagley has Hiltons which paid grocery bills; Sally Ince has Hiltons which paid doctor bills. Hilton died in Hawaii on 27 November 1983. A modern day (1980s) dentist in Twentynine Palms now is an avid Hilton collector. In 1951, Hilton was one of the founders of the Twentynine Palms Art Gallery, which endures in its charming adobe structure between the Inn and Monument Headquarters, near the old oasis.

ing their times here to "get away from it all." More meaningful to the community which was to become something of a Marine town was the postwar arrival in Twentynine Palms of Dr. Edward Lincoln Smith, a New Englander by birth and a physician by way of an education at Yale and then the Harvard Medical School. Dr. Smith came to the desert via a war-time stint as a Navy doctor, during which he served on Guadalcanal with the 1st Marine Division, and more specifically as surgeon for the infantry battalion commanded by one of the best-known Marine Corps heroes of the period—Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller.\*

"Dr. Ed," as he was known by most of the residents of Twentynine Palms for all of those postwar years until he retired and moved away in the late 1970s, was one of the few who ever got to Twentynine Palms by accident.\*\* But he stayed on purpose. After returning from wartime duty in the Pacific, Dr. Smith served, among other places, in the Navy V-12 unit at the University of Arizona facilities in Flagstaff. After the war ended, he came back to Flagstaff to visit friends, and to pop over into California to establish his medical credentials there, since he thought that someday he would semi-retire to a small practice in that state. While in California, Dr. Smith was talked into visiting Dr. Luckie in Pasadena. Twentynine Palms desperately needed a doctor. The very sort of a call Hippocrates must have had in mind. Dr. Smith opened his practice in the desert town on 4 December 1946; he retired on 1 June 1979.

Meanwhile, also in December of 1946, Dr. William T. Ince, D.O., came to Twentynine Palms with his wife Sally, and about a year later launched construction of a small hospital—a memorial to his father, Thomas H. Ince, that pioneer Hollywood producer who was an early associate of Mack Sennett of those one-reel comedy films which became classics. Thomas Ince also produced the movie called "Civilization," one of Hollywood's first feature-length films. (There also were others in his distinguished career.)

Osteopathic physicians, which Ince was, and medi-

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\*In the Burke Davis biography of Puller, *Marine!* (New York: Little, Brown & Co., 1962), there are several references to Dr. Smith. The most moving one, p. 163, describes the doctor in the battalion aid station operating on wounded Marines, one shoe sucked off by the mud underfoot. It was an all-night ordeal for Puller and his people.

\*\*He moved away, to the San Francisco Bay area, not because he did not like Twentynine Palms and the desert, but, as he was always careful to explain, because he knew his patients of long standing would just never stop calling him. And—left unsaid by this dedicated professional—because he knew he could never, in this village, stop responding to those calls.

cal doctors, which Ed Smith was, sometimes did not know quite how to deal with each other, but by about the time the Marines arrived in town these two doctors were cooperating with each other, and the Ince hospital provided much valuable service to early day Marines, and of course to the community as a whole. A *Desert Trail* "Progress Number" supplement of July 1953 lists William T. Ince, D.O., as administrator of the hospital and Edward Lincoln Smith, M.D., as medical director.

Meanwhile, as "The Lady from Twentynine Palms" jangled along, and with most Americans not watching international affairs, World War II was not getting tidied up satisfactorily on the far side of the Pacific. Russian troops and administrators in North Korea and similar U.S. forces in South Korea had taken over that former Japanese possession, with a view to uniting the country (split administratively at the 38th parallel) and bringing it into the United Nations. Russia did not want this to happen, and it set up a puppet government in North Korea and trained and equipped a native military force. When the matter of Korea's entry into the United Nations came up, Russia stopped it with a veto.

After nearly four years of postwar occupation, U.S. forces withdrew from the south in the spring of 1949, leaving only some administrators and token military units. About a year later, on 25 June 1950, a North Korean army, Russian trained and equipped, assaulted South Korea. The Security Council, with Russia's delegates sulking in absentia over the non-seating of mainland China, designated North Korea the aggressor, urged a cease fire, and called on United Nations members to unite for the restoration of peace in Korea. On 27 June, President Truman sent American forces into action, and throughout the nation the ancient and honorable profession of arms began again to look toward mobilization.

At Camp Pendleton, California, in the northern reaches up toward San Onofre beaches and that small white stucco town of San Clemente with its red tile roofs, the old World War II tent camps re-opened. Soon, new Marines and older ones from reserve status were kicking the rattlesnakes into testy wakefulness in those brown summer hills. Mainside looked like a boomtown again. The whole place was so busy there were almost no impact areas remaining for artillery, which had grown larger, or for rockets, which were growing into missiles. For artillerymen, an "R-Sop" at



Marine Corps Historical Collection

*The main gate of the new Marine Corps Training Center, located four miles north of the small desert community of Twentynine Palms, housed a 70-man detachment from Camp Pendleton tasked with preparing the base for the complement of permanent personnel.*

Horno Ridge was about as exciting as finding your starting notch on an acey ducey board.\*

Searchers for better training areas scouted far and wide, and soon up jumped that weird hunk of desert where gliders once soared, and where Navy fliers later strafed and bombed. In early summer of 1952, whispers from these searchers and their motor transport drivers began to go around Pendleton: Buy Twentynine Palms! This to brother Marines—officer and enlisted—who individually had about as much money as those early gold seekers of the desert. Buy the sand while it is hot, one wag suggested. The base-to-be is about the size of the state of Rhode Island, with Narragansett Bay squeezed out, another early visitor said, and then he added he would not give \$14 for all of it. You've got to put on gloves to open and close your car door, or you get blisters. "Twentynine Stumps," some salty old warrior from Pacific campaigns dubbed it. And "The Stumps" it became to a whole generation of Marines who couldn't quite imagine what the

\*"R-Sop" is pronounced "are-sop" by artillerymen. Their most frequently used bit of jargon. The letters stand for reconnaissance, selection, and occupation of position (for firing). Thus, what a rifleman probably would call a "field exercise" or "going to the field," an artilleryman would call an "R-Sop."

Corps was going to do in the middle of the blank-blank desert!

But barracks banter did not dissuade. On 20 August 1952, Base Headquarters at Camp Pendleton issued Post Order 343, and some of the 930 square miles of desert, more than half a million acres—Rhode Island squeezed dry—became a Marine Corps Training Center owned and operated by Pendleton. It was quite an acquisition for that once Marine Barracks, Santa Margarita Ranch, Oceanside, California. And for the Marine Corps, as we shall see.

Major (almost at once to become Lieutenant Colonel) Frederick H. Scantling was sprung from a job with the 2d Infantry Training Regiment at Pendleton and put in command of Camp Detachment, Marine Corps Training Center.\*\* This outfit first set up in the

\*\*Scantling, a World War II veteran of the Pacific campaigns with the 1st Marine Division, saw action on Guadalcanal, Cape Gloucester, and Peleliu. Perhaps this travel, courtesy of the Marine Corps, plus his posting to the strange and fascinating desert base—which he explored extensively—sparked his interest in geography. At any rate, after his retirement in 1963, Fred Scantling earned a Ph.D. in geography at UCLA, and taught that subject from 1966 until 1980 as a professor at Long Beach State. Dr. Scantling and his wife, Nonie, whom he met during that greatest of all World War II duty, in Melbourne, Australia, reside in Long Beach.

12 Area at Pendleton, there to get organized for later transfer up the hill to the desert. This came about for Lieutenant Colonel Scantling and his detachment on 15 December 1952. The Marine Corps dispatched them to the old Army glider base beside Condor Field to keep tabs on things while a large civilian construction firm—Twaits-Morrison-Knudsen-Macco—began to build a new base for the Marines. Construction was under the eye of a Naval Resident-Officer-in-Charge-of-Construction (ROICC), Lieutenant Commander John P. Mapes. Scantling's detachment numbered about two dozen Marines.

Scantling recalled later that the construction company, and Mapes, had started work in June or July. Mapes, with his family, lived somewhere in the vicinity of Smith Ranch—that old roller rink later to become a gymnasium, with drive-in movie alongside. Lieutenant Colonel Scantling moved his family up to the desert in August, and commuted from desert to Pendleton until the detachment came up in December. Meantime, elements of the 3d Marine Division's artillery regiment, the 12th Marines, also had been commuting up and down the Morongo Grade to explore and fire the Corps' newly acquired ranges. Commanding Officer of the 12th Marines in those days was Colonel Leonard F. Chapman, Jr., later to become the 20th Commandant.

Usually, in those days, the artillery vehicles turned north off the highway a few miles short (west) of the village of Twentynine Palms, and drove into the training center toward a small lone mountain then called Pinto.\* The units frequently set up a command post at the oasis called Surprise Springs, near where water wells have been put down over the years to provide for the ever-increasing needs of the growing base.\*\*

With Lieutenant Colonel Scantling and his small detachment in place, and battalions of the 12th Marines scouting the hills and canyons, the 3d Marine Division from Pendleton put together an ambitious

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\*There are Pinto Mountains elsewhere in the vicinity, and after a breath-catching firing error some years later, lone Pinto became Hidalgo—son of someone, or something, as a senior officer might have called it in the excitement of the moment.

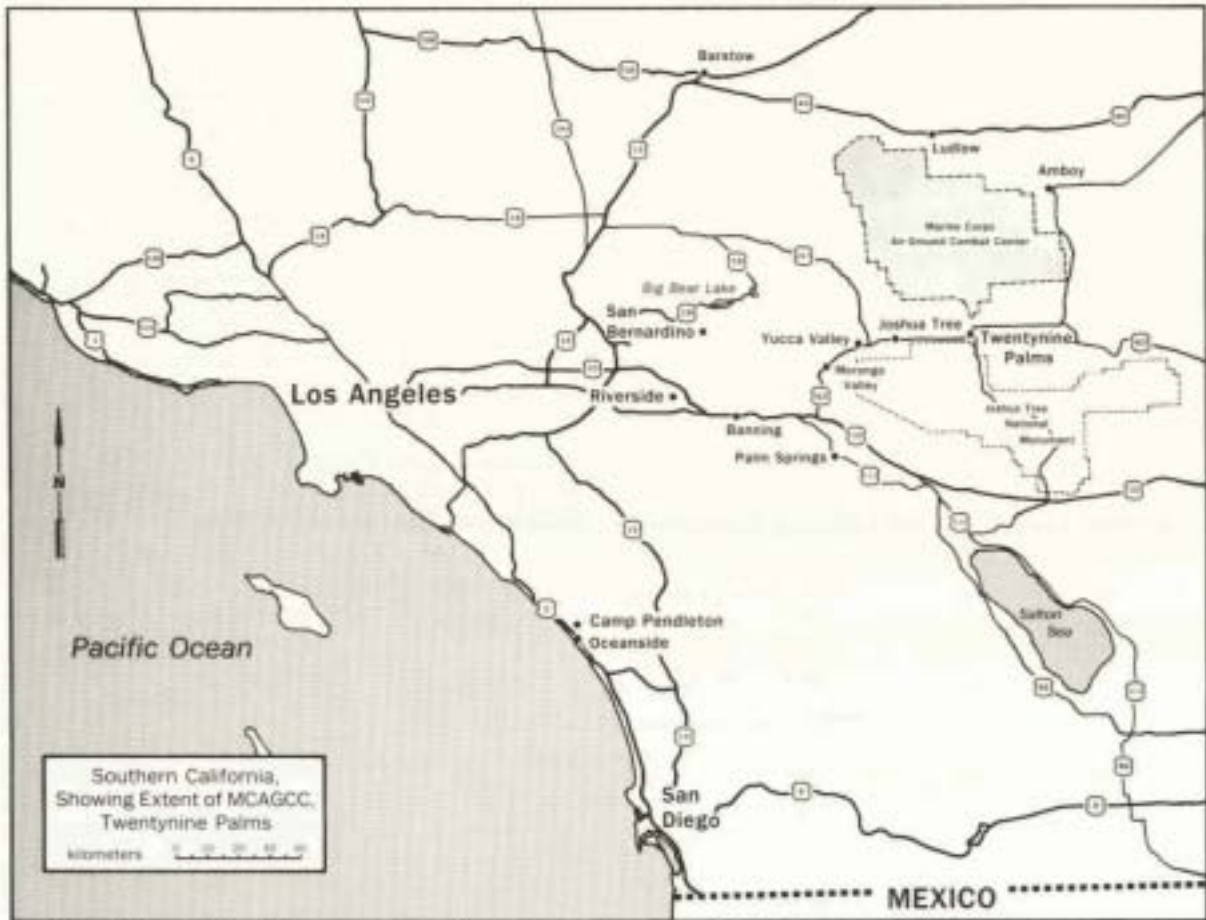
\*\*As the base grew in the 1950s, Surprise Springs became a popular recreation site for Marines and their families—picnics and cook-outs, with park-type tables and other facilities. Latter day Marines might smile. Relaxing at a quaint oasis might seem a bit like that "mitage out south of town," which humorist Herb Schriener used to say was a popular spot near his Hoosier home. But for a town where folks used to gather to watch the flash floods go by, a nice oasis was a treasure indeed. Surprise Springs died with a lowering water table, better pay for the troops, and fast cars which could swoop to brighter liberty spots.

live-fire expedition to the new training center. The 1st Marine Division, traditional occupant of Pendleton after new members of the "Old Breed" came home from the Pacific at the end of World War II and occupation duty in North China, had gone off to that new war in Korea. Later, at Pendleton, the 3d Marine Brigade had formed, under command of that fiery warrior, Chesty Puller, who already had made new combat marks in Korea, and was now a brigadier general. After President Truman admitted he ought not to have said, early in the Korean period, that the Marine Corps was sort of the police force for the Navy, with "a propaganda machine that is almost equal to Stalin's," Congress had given the Marine Corps a new manpower level, and Chesty's brigade was authorized to grow to division size. Commanded by Major General Robert H. Pepper (the assistant division commander was Brigadier General Joseph C. Burger), the division went up to Twentynine Palms for the two weeks prior to Christmas in 1952.

As a live-firing exercise, it was rather a stilted affair, compared to combined arms exercises 30 and more years later. But as someone once said about the walking bear: be not critical of the gait, but rather marvel that he stands at all. The division was brand new, with a lot of young Marines and old retreads not yet shaken down into a smooth and measured gait. Safety measures and extreme caution rightfully ruled.

The exercise proved that Twentynine Palms was going to be a greatly useful place, and that live firing—artillery over the riflemen and all—would bring the troops to effective seasoning much quicker than simulation which frequently lacked stimulation. It also taught the Marine Corps a lot of amazing things about its new chunk of desert. At night it was bitter cold, a little spitting of snow proved that. A raw wind seemed to blow eternally out of the southwest. It could take away a little coffee fire if the blaze was not guarded in the lee of a bit of a hillock, or behind a large rock. Shaving cream from an aerosol can—rather a new product at that time—dried so quickly in the desert wind that Marines trying to shave with this stuff were all too soon scraping and pulling painfully through what seemed to be a white chalky stucco on the face.

This, for Twentynine Palms and for the 3d Marine Division, was FEX-1—Field Exercise I. The Commandant of the Korean Marine Corps, Major General Shin Hyon Joon, came out to watch. Aide to General Pepper was Captain Paul G. Graham, who came back to Twentynine Palms in April of 1971 as Brigadier General Graham, 10th commanding general of the base



which became an independent command in February of 1957.\*

Meanwhile, Lieutenant Colonel Scantling's outfit was growing slowly, and he was trying to provide health and comfort accommodations for his Marines while the new construction grew north of the old Army buildings near the main gate and the control tower building. For a time, harking back to frontier days on Army posts, Marines with families could make commissary-type grocery purchases through the subsistence supply system. The command set up a small commissary in the old buildings, and made a large

messhall-type refrigerator available. The store opened for business with very limited stock—staples, meat, and canned goods, all in rather meager choices. In all of Twentynine Palms in those days, Lieutenant Colonel Scantling recalled there were perhaps three small grocery markets—Frank and Helen Bagley's by-now rather historic market on the Plaza, another on the highway near where the diagonal road went northeastward to Two Mile Road, and then another little grocery on the main stem downtown, perhaps a couple of blocks west of Four Corners. "We were strictly on the local economy," Lieutenant Colonel Scantling recalled, "and there wasn't much of it."

A messhall for unmarried Marines—and for such civilian workers who wanted to buy meals there—occupied one of the old Army buildings—a long narrow building with long narrow tables, Scantling recalled. Marines elsewhere had known more primitive accommodations in peacetime, but even the simple frame structures at Pendleton seemed most modern—and they were certainly much more spacious—compared with this little base put up by an ad hoc civilian firm for the Army's small glider school.

\*Another illustrious participant was the writer of this history, then a captain commanding Company F, 2d Battalion, 9th Marines. I came back on board the base in the spring of 1973 as the Base Chief of Staff, and retired on 1 August 1975 as Deputy Commandet. After the trip in 1952, my report to my wife in our San Clemente apartment concluded with the observation that in a place I didn't catch the name of (Yucca Valley, as it turned out), there were street signs, and curbs and gutters extending out into the vacant, dusty desert. "As if," I said, to GeneCarolyn, "they expect people to live out there someday!" And now, as the old joke says: "We are one." Not in Yucca, mind you, but in the real desert. Twentynine Palms where retired Marines have been known to feature their old lawnmowers in dramatic monuments in their front yards.

General Pepper came to inspect rather early on, Lieutenant Colonel Scantling said later, adding that this was perhaps about the time of the field exercise, or maybe just after the first of 1953. The commanding officer of the desert outpost said the general "seemed appalled at conditions." He did not blame Scantling, but he disliked seeing Marines in what by now looked like a makeshift camp, after some seven years of neglect. An old China and Haiti hand who had been in command of a defense battalion at Pearl Harbor on that infamous 7 December, General Pepper seemed to feel it was a shame that Scantling's Marines had to leave Pendleton for this—so many weeks and months before new barracks and facilities would be ready for them in the desert.

But from the start, Marines in Twentynine Palms enjoyed a warmth of friendliness from citizens of the town, a closeness which often was lacking from bigger places—or even in Oceanside, then a rather small town itself. They made for the only "industry" in the desert, and they were representatives of the "outside" to still-remote Twentynine. Into the bargain, this not-

too-long-ago pioneer town founded with a strong leavening of veterans of World War I just plain enjoyed seeing the military come to town again. Citizens had liked the glider school because it allowed them a means to participate in World War II; and anyway, so soon after the end of that war, the military still was popular in the land. And California dwellers, especially, knew about the Marine Corps' share of that war in the Pacific. It was a happy marriage of Marines and town, one which has endured to the present day—made only a bit more distant because both sides have grown into more sophisticated members of a more modern and busy world.

There was a bit of a problem, though, which Lieutenant Colonel Scantling recalled, having to do with water. He was quick to add that the problem did not seem to come from members of the Twentynine Palms community, but from outlanders who had development plans for the high desert and feared that the Marine Corps might soak up too much water. Whatever this faction came from, it tried to churn up a water panic. Big city newspapers down below took up the

*LtCol Frederick J. Scantling, commanding officer of the training center, hands papers to MSgt Charles H. Carpenter, as they prepare for the permanent occupation of the base.*

Marine Corps Historical Collection





Marine Corps Historical Collection

*The makeshift headquarters of the Marine detachment at Twentynine Palms was the operations building of the former World War II-era Army Air Forces and Navy airfield.*

cause, which usually expressed itself in the fear that the military camp would take away precious water from the desert communities which had long been struggling for sufficient water for themselves. Finally, the problem went away after water explorations presented evidence that the Morongo Basin rested on quite a lot of water, and that the Marine Corps wells, maintained by the military, would not seriously draw down the table.

When the Marines first arrived in 1952, there was a water tank on a hill northeast of the main gate. Scantling said he did not remember where the well was. The Army, however, had put down wells back in 1941, calling on a well-known firm in Chino, the Mogle Brothers. Richard Mogle said later that his firm had been contacted by the Army in that year prior to the glider base going in, and they had found adequate supplies of water. The firm came back later, in response to requests from Commander Mapes and his superiors in naval construction offices on the West Coast, and drilled more wells for the expanding Marine facility.

The underground fault line which caused Surprise Springs to bubble up into an oasis, and caused the old Oasis of Mara to form a fresh pond which nurtured those twenty-nine palms, formed an aquifer with

a hidden basin rim down 80 to 400 feet. It offered up, for the tapping, a promised abundance of water for as many Marines as would likely be brought out here, said the Mogle Brothers, for the next 200 years, at least.

Marines put diesel-powered pumps at these new wells, and pushed the water through long 12- to 14-inch pipes into mainside tanks. The contractors began to stub up water pipes for all the concrete slabs where there would be barracks, messhalls, heating plants, supply and headquarters buildings, chapels, and clubs. And unlike the Biblical bitter waters of Marah, here one could drink of the waters of Mara—and surprise—for they were not bitter.

Never, in the Twentynine Palms desert, had there been such a beachhead. The construction company had a revolutionary way to pour concrete buildings in sections, great gray slabs on the ground, and then slurp them up with pneumatic suction "cups" at the ends of articulated arms, and tilt a building up, roof slabs and all, like a great monster laying up concrete blocks.

*A new kind of gal of the west . . .  
 . . . a dynamite dreamboat  
 A load of atom bombs,  
 The Lady from Twentynine Palms!*

## CHAPTER 5

# The Early Years

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If Fred Scantling and his few Marines roughed it in those early days at Twentynine Palms, in the view of General Pepper, it was all a worthwhile down payment on space and training assets which amounted to the Marine Corps striking it rich in a way only dreamed of by all the gold seekers who ever challenged the desert. Originally conceived as a "low-cost" range for indirect fire weapons outgrowing the capabilities of bases the Marine Corps previously thought of as almost boundless, Twentynine Palms from the early years, and on into the final decades of the 20th Century, continued to deliver up unexpected values.

Construction by pre-cast, tilt-up concrete slabs proved quick, efficient, and spectacularly economical. The method was used elsewhere later by the Twaits-Morrison-Knudsen-Macco construction company, and others, but in 1952, 1953, and 1954, the project at Twentynine Palms was the largest such endeavor ever undertaken. So said the Portland Cement Association in the November 1953 *Architectural Record*, a national trade publication serving the building field. In its first increment, the Marine Corps project at Twentynine Palms provided permanent living space for approximately 4,000 men, at a cost-per-man of \$600, a savings of about \$900 per man, according to construction computations of the day. A West Coast consulting engineer, William B. Bradford, who had been involved in the Twentynine Palms planning, said in a 24 March 1953 letter to President Eisenhower that this new and economical building method allowed the Marine Corps to establish permanent housing for the usual price of temporary, quonset-hut-type construction which had been much in vogue in the latter days of World War II and immediately thereafter.

That first flurry of building, which had been underway when Lieutenant Colonel Scantling and his small detachment came up the hill from Pendleton in December of 1952, by the end of 1953 provided six battalion-sized areas and other headquarters and utility buildings, messhalls, chapels, and so forth. By then it was about halfway to—or perhaps a little less—its initial target in accommodations.

Some \$14.5 million had been spent by 1 January 1954—most of it for the construction project. Base ac-

quisition amounted to less than \$90,000; architectural and engineering costs came in at about \$343,000. Still on the books from funds authorized by Congress for additional facilities were about \$2.5 million for ammunition storage areas, rifle and pistol ranges, two training tanks, some protected observation posts out in the indirect fire ranges, and other required facilities.\* All amounted to a much larger budget than any homesteader ever had in the desert, but still a "bargain basement" undertaking as military bases went, even in those years.

Although still owned by Camp Pendleton, Twentynine Palms early on began to seem ideally suited as an all-purpose base for Force Troops units from throughout the Marine Corps. In the fall of 1953, Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, needed to free up some barracks and training spaces for a four-week individual infantry training program initiated there for young Marines just winding up boot camp, and to keep replacements flowing to the Korean sector. So off went some Force Troops units from Lejeune, onto ships at Morehead City and through the Panama Canal for landing at San Diego, followed by a convoy grind up to the high desert.

One who made the trip with the 2d Anti-Aircraft Artillery (Automatic Weapons) Battalion was Gunnery Sergeant Charlie E. Miller, who spent much of the remainder of his career at Twentynine Palms.\*\* "We were

\*The training tanks were swimming pools. Some Marines claimed that calling them swimming pools would have looked a bit frivolous in budget requests. Call them training tanks, and that sounded just tough enough to get by Congress. A base commander of that period, Colonel John S. Oldfield, recalled, "The day the first training tank opened, we estimated that 2,500 men entered the pool. A very welcome addition to the base."

\*\*This is the Charlie Miller who since the mid-1960s had a feed and tack store on Adobe Road out toward the base. Later, on part of his 100-plus acres, he irrigated and raised alfalfa hay, to bale and sell down below and to local horse owners. High cost of electricity (for his irrigation pumps) and low cost of hay stopped this activity, and those pleasantly green fields again became dusty desert. From time to time Pioneer Day carnivals and rodeos were staged on these fields. Gunny Miller frequently managed the base stables when he was on active duty, and for years he was the manager and NCO in charge of the base mounted color guard which appeared in parades throughout Southern California, from the mid-1950s into the mid-1960s. The store, in the 1970s and 1980s, began to handle building material, also.



From *The EM-Kayman*: Magazine of "M-K," December 1982

*An early morning aerial view of the concrete casting yard shows rows of neatly stacked roof panels in the foreground and the graded area for the 330-acre base in the distance.*

the first troops into those new, concrete barracks," Gunny Miller said. He recalled that not all streets were paved, and that no parade grounds ("grinders") were paved. His unit arrived, after that trip through the Panama Canal, in October of 1953. Mess halls were in operation, but there was no sickbay worthy of the name. Sick call went in individual units, and if somebody had a serious problem, he got sent down to Pendleton, Balboa Naval Hospital in San Diego, or to a naval hospital then open in Ontario, California.

One new concrete barracks was divided between use as a temporary sickbay, with a few beds at one end, and a staff NCO club at the other. Movies also were shown in various barracks, Gunny Miller said. The big theater on the base still was not finished, and the gunny recalled that the contractors had some troubles there.

What the trouble was, Fred Scantling said later, amounted to the contractors appearing to pull a fast one on the Navy's contract supervisor, Lieutenant Mapes, and getting caught at it. Because of its size, the theater had to have a number of tall pillars (or "bents" as the contractors call them) to support the transverse frame of the tall building with its high ceiling; and on these the roof would be placed, and the side slabs would be hung. Specifications called for the tall bents to be poured in stages, within the forms

which surrounded the inner skeleton of reinforcing steel. Otherwise, too much of the heavy aggregate settled toward the bottom of the pour, resulting in honeycombing at the bottom and weakness at the top. But in this case, the contractor poured a bent all at once, and Mapes made the company remove the bad work—mostly by hand chipping—and do it again, correctly.

Another problem which Scantling recalls from the early days had to do with the new power line which had to be brought up from an electrical substation near what is now the Whitewater area. This was needed because the available electrical power then in Twenty-nine Palms was not sufficient for the growing base. The first power line contractor, Scantling said, "died on his shovel" before he got to the start of the Morongo grade. He had not adequately respected the hard-rock nature of the desert below what appeared to be easy-to-dig "sand." Another contractor was found to finish the job.

In these early years, Lieutenant Colonel Scantling also had duties which perhaps helped him to later become a professor of geography. The Marine Corps did not quite know where the boundaries of the new base were located. Scantling and some of his Marines, by jeep (and map-making as they explored) located boundaries, and in the process scouted and mapped

routes by which units could get to and from the selected training areas. And along the way, Scantling said, he mapped old gold mines and other hazards to traffic—including some old ordnance from Navy bombing days.

Later, and into the period when he became executive officer to the new commanding officer, Colonel Francis R. (Monte) Brink, who arrived in mid-1953, Scantling put his knowledge of the mines to good use for the naval establishment and the federal government. To get clear title to the vast reaches of the base, for the federal government and the Marine Corps, U.S. attorneys had to go into federal court and foreclose on old mining claims, many of them "officially lost" in dusty records. "But claimants came out of the woodwork," Scantling explained later. "I often had to scout out the mine areas, to be able to say there was no evidence of recent work there. With me as the expert witness, U.S. attorneys were able to dispose of most old claims."

Most of those at the base in earlier years recall more good times than bad. It seemed that Sergeant Buckland and his tarantula had done a good job warming up the community for the military. The isolation strengthened ties in the military community, as it had done just after World War I for the civilian community. This camaraderie spread from one group to the other, and linked town and military into a strong new fellowship. Schools and many other activities, official and unofficial, had to be planned and worked out together.

On 10 April 1953, Nonie Scantling, that World War II bride from Melbourne, Australia, checked in at the Ince hospital in Twentynine Palms and delivered the Scantlings' third child, son Frederick H. Scantling, Jr. Young Fred was the first Marine child born in that community hospital, which as had been noted, served dependents from the base as well as Marines in emergencies.

As Gunny Miller noted, and as Lieutenant Colonel Scantling explained in some detail, Navy hospital corpsmen came up with those first Marines who arrived at the base, but there still were no doctors. Drs. Ince and Smith, out in town, were the nearest at hand.

Mothers of young children frequently found it tough to live all day on that pioneer camaraderie, Scantling conceded. Laundry facilities were scarce, automatic machines were almost unknown, and, anyway, low water pressure often made it difficult to use such facilities as were at hand. And if you ran out of things, you often had to do without until you or a neighbor made a run "down below."

For the young troopers, Scantling said, much of the special services-type functions and physical education training, plus indoor sports contests, centered around Smith's Ranch, where an outdoor theater survived into the mid-1980s. There, in the early years, were movies, dances, and "soda fountain" social life. But then on weekends, the young Marines "took off like shots," Scantling said. Usually for "L.A."

Scantling and young supply officer Bud Schmid (who in those days also had to pass for what later came to be called the fiscal officer) thought they should make "swooping" (a later term) easier for the young Marines, and so they set up a "bus" schedule with such motor transport trucks as they had.\* The return trip vehicle from Los Angeles left at a specified time and place on Sunday evenings.

The Marines by and large ignored the service. Too much regimentation for them, Scantling said later, after duty all week. They would much rather thumb to liberty, or drive old clunkers that sometimes got them there, and sometimes did not. So the truck trips were knocked off. A Marine headed for liberty has always been a most enterprising individual.

While Scantling stayed on for a time as second-in-command to Colonel Monte Brink, he was soon off to the Senior Course at Marine Corps Schools, Quantico. After that he did a tour with the 3d Marine Division in the Far East (Japan and Okinawa), and then returned to Twentynine Palms for a three-year tour starting in August 1955.

By the end of *that* tour, most of mainside was pretty much as it looked by the early 1980s, and the Marine Palms housing area was finished near the main gate. But before that, much more sand came over the transom.

The only family quarters available on 1 January 1954 included 34 defense rental houses (off the base) plus 316 trailers and other "relocatables" near the main gate. Some of the 34 rentals off base, since torn down, included a cluster near the present post office in Twentynine Palms. These dated to World War II days, and usually were called "Navy housing." Others of the off-base houses were those built by contract after Marines began to arrive at the base. Headquarters Marine Corps knew, of course, that there was not much family hous-

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\*Brigadier General Oldfield recalled in the mid-1980s that "the main mode of public transportation from Twentynine Palms to San Bernardino and other connections consisted of an old civilian bus which was referred to by all as the Twentynine Palms Stage. Most of the time this bus was out of service, or if it did move, it was at an agonizingly slow pace." (Author's note: This was the "Johnny Hastie bus" which linked the desert community with the outside world in those early years.)



Marine Corps Historical Collection

*Cranes equipped with vacuum mats prepare to lift precast concrete to the roof of one of the six 1,000-man messhalls under construction at the new training center.*

ing left from Army Air Corps and Navy days, and also that the small community of Twentynine Palms had very little rental housing to offer.

Major General W. P. T. Hill, that famous-for-so-many-years Quartermaster General of the Marine Corps, one day in 1953 called Twentynine's young supply officer, Captain Bud Schmid. "If I send you money authorization," Schmid later recalled the word from Hill, "can you contract for some houses to be built in the town of Twentynine Palms?" "Then," said the general from Washington, "you can rent or sell them to married Marines as family quarters." These became the houses of the Sungold development, along El Paseo street which runs from the back of the county library westward to the area of the present Twentynine Palms high school. Later, there were others built.

Bud Schmid was willing to do almost anything to start getting rid of those trailers and "relocatables" (immobile mobile homes) near the main gate—units which together amounted to some 316 family quarters where the Marine wives, many of them with young children, had to live on that camaraderie and low water pressure, plus contend with gas pilot lights which often would blow out during desert winds. Then Bud Schmid and his staff Marines would have to go crawling around amid scorpions and black widow spiders under those mobile homes to get gas space heaters and water heaters going again.

Most of this early living was keeping house for indirect fire units which came to the desert for brief firing exercises, and helping the contractors watch over their material and their building projects. The kind

of tough, hot, and sometimes wind-and-rain abrasive work which the early glider pilots remembered, but without the airborne fun of soaring along those hills in the up-slope currents. There was much neighborly fun, then and later, with townspeople who could make a party out of watching the flash floods go by, or having a picnic in the national monument or at Surprise Springs. Fred Scantling got to make the first dial telephone call from Twentynine Palms, in 1953. Dr. Bill Ince had a small cannon which he would fire on "state occasions."\* Life wasn't all that bad.

Except for the Marine with a surprise set of orders, and over the years, orders to Twentynine Palms always seemed to come as a surprise, first impressions always seemed pretty much the same: a hot, dusty, desolate military camp in a sparsely-settled and lonely outpost of a town. The officer who was later (in July 1953) to replace Fred Scantling as commander of the place, first thought of it as all of the above. This was Colonel Brink, who first rode up to Twentynine Palms in early 1953 with the Pendleton deputy commander, Brigadier General James A. Stuart. And what was more, as a 1925 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, Monte Brink believed the amphibious Marine Corps had made a gigantic goof pouring funds into a sand pile so far from its assigned element. Brink wrote later of his first trip up to the desert:

I wasn't impressed by what I saw. The new camp was similar to several being constructed in the Camp Pendleton area.

\*This little noise-maker from Mexican campaigns was known as "El Supremo," Brigadier General Oldfield recalled. Anyone saluted by it considered it a real honor.

But it was primarily the desert that did not appeal to me. The camp was being built on a narrow strip of sand between a range of rocky hills and dry lake bed. The whole landscape was bleak and desolate. These hills to the East, without a sprig of vegetation, would radiate heat on summer afternoons like a slag pile. The dry lake bed to the West was spotted with alkali. The low cement barracks were being built on a tiled rectangular plain which gave them the appearance of being strung out on a long hillside. I was sure I could have picked a better spot, even in the desert.<sup>1</sup>

On the way back down to Pendleton, Brink wrote later, the general asked him what he thought of the place.

I wasn't sure if he meant the camp or the town. But my opinion of both was the same. "Not much," I answered. "They should give the place back to the Indians."

He smiled. "Too bad. I was hoping you would show more enthusiasm. We're sending you out here this summer as soon as the camp is finished."<sup>2</sup>

Back at Camp Pendleton, Colonel Brink soon heard of General Pepper's earlier inspection of the outpost at Twentynine Palms—the one which had so disturbed Lieutenant Colonel Scantling. Brink placed that inspection as early in July 1953. Scantling's recollection was that it had been earlier than this. At any rate, General Pepper believed the Marines in the desert had come upon a treatment more shabby than they deserved. General Pepper asked Monte Brink "When are you leaving for Twentynine Palms?" Upshot of this was that Brink left sooner than he expected, his inventory and balance sheet from his post exchange duties at Pendleton rushed to completion and several of the papers sent up to Twentynine Palms later for his signature.

At the new base, he wrote later, he began to understand some of Pepper's concern. The civilian contractor had taken over quite a lot of the old, meager facilities from glider school and later days. First order of business for improved facilities and morale of Marines was to regain control of the old galley of the glider base (Gwyn Keys' Canteen), which the contractor was using.

Armed with General Pepper's instructions, I sent Captain Smith [Bud Schmid] to open negotiations with the Contractor's Superintendent. The fact that the contractor was

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<sup>1</sup>Monte Brink later came around to believing the Marine Corps had made a good deal on the bleak and desolate land. Not only that, but after he served as commanding officer of the center from 1953 to 1954, he retired (as a brigadier general) to the place. He died in Twentynine Palms on 16 October 1973. The writer of this history, then base chief of staff, served as one of the pallbearers at Brink's funeral when he was buried in the Twentynine Palms cemetery.

two months behind in his schedule also was in our favor. He was agreeable providing we would feed his men at the regular ration price. I agreed to this and getting on the telephone got a quick promise from Pendleton for additional cooks and a new mess sergeant. This arrangement was in effect until in October when the contractor's personnel were all off of the station and worked better than I had expected.<sup>3</sup>

With the "old" galley of glider days turned into the "new" galley for Marines and such civilian workers as were authorized to eat there, Colonel Brink turned Scantling's makeshift galley into a makeshift post exchange. That sort of facility had been a major concern of General Pepper also, and Monte Brink wrote later that he was hurrying because he expected the general to come up again soon for another inspection. That did not happen, though, as General Pepper went off to a new assignment before he could visit Twentynine Palms again.

Colonel Brink also continued to press for more quarters for dependents. The Sungold Tract, supervised by Scantling and Schmid after that telephone call from General Hill, brought in its 50 homes in late fall of 1953. These, backed by Veterans Administration financing, sold only to military personnel in ranks from staff NCO through lieutenant colonel, for around \$10,000—a fair and common price range in those days for frame and stucco houses. Most had two to three bedrooms, usually one bath only, a single-car garage and "city-sized" lots.

A similar tract, near the Sungold, made available another 50 homes of this type by the end of 1954. This was the Hamilton Tract. These 100 homes, along with the trailers and relocatables near the main gate, provided the bulk of available family housing until the Marine Palms units were completed a bit later.

Colonel Brink also listed the meager assets of "Sunburnt Housing" units—some 20 apartments dating back to the Navy days at Condor Field in later days of World War II. These were on concrete slabs which still could be seen in the mid-1980s east of the present Twentynine Palms post office.

First troops to move into new barracks at Twentynine Palms, those new tilt-up concrete buildings, were the Marines of Lieutenant Colonel Eugene V. Boro's 1st Anti-Aircraft Artillery (Automatic Weapons) Battalion, as General Brink recalled. This was on 29 Sep-

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<sup>2</sup>Brigadier General Brink wrote this manuscript some time after his retirement, hence his reference throughout to "Smith" as his supply officer in those early days. He had died before Bud Schmid came back to town as commanding general of the base, in May of 1974.



Marine Corps Historical Collection

*Modern-design barracks constructed of precast concrete panels incorporated wide cantilever overhangs which offered maximum protection against the desert sun and heat.*

tember 1953.\* In October of that year, the 1st 155mm Gun Battalion (Lieutenant Colonel Raymond D. Wright) arrived in the desert, but first moved into a tent camp out toward Surprise Springs and Camp Wilson. It moved into some of the new buildings on 4 November.

As Force Troops units began to arrive and settle in at the new complex in the desert, a Force Artillery Headquarters set up shop on 27 October 1953, with Lieutenant Colonel George H. Ford in command. He was succeeded on 18 November by Colonel Clarence A. Barninger. Barninger remained until early the following year when on 8 January 1954, Colonel Thomas S. Ivey assumed that command. This was a Force Troops organization which functioned under the umbrella command of Brigadier General Joseph W. Earnshaw of Force Troops, Pacific. General Joe Earnshaw's flag flew at Camp Pendleton in those days.

Other units which came up the hill to the desert following those mentioned above included the 1st 75mm Anti-Aircraft Artillery Training Battery, the 2d 155mm Gun Battalion, the 2d 90mm Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion, the 2d Anti-Aircraft Artillery (Automatic Weapons) Battalion, the 1st 155mm Howitzer Battalion, and a detachment of the 1st Combat

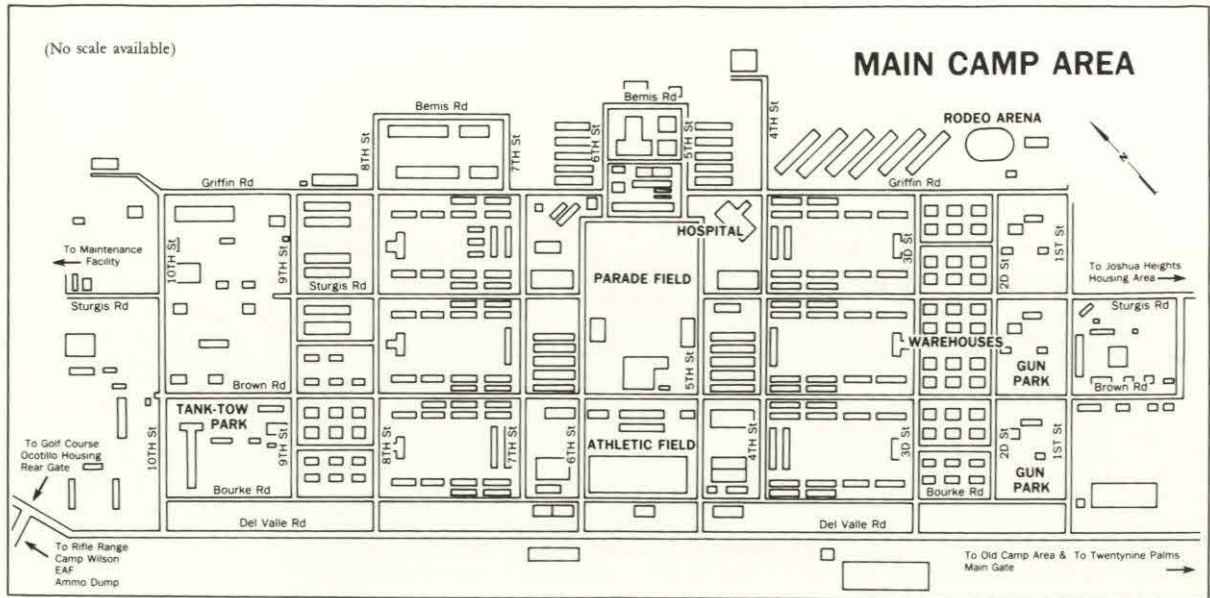
Service Group. This lineup of units, with Tom Ivey in command of Force Troops elements and Monte Brink in command of the base, continued until late 1954 when Colonel Brink's tour ended.\*\*

While this early Force Troops buildup took place, Colonel Brink later wrote that his command had grown to about 200 enlisted Marines (by early 1954), and from eight to about a dozen officers. That enlisted strength, Brink noted, amounted to "less than half of the authorized strength." Not an uncommon kettle of fish in the Marine Corps at any time before or since, and especially then while the Korean War emergency continued. At least now there were growing numbers of Force Troops Marines, who could "augment" for the base—if the normal administrative arrangements could be hammered out.

In April of 1954 the two chapels were dedicated, with General Earnshaw up from Pendleton, along with Major General and Mrs. John T. Selden. Colonel Brink, Colonel Ivey, and both general officers said a few words, as did the senior chaplain from the 11th

\*This does not square exactly with the recollections of Gunnery Sergeant Charlie Miller. But official sources do credit Colonel Boro's Marines as the first to move into the new buildings. No doubt the pace of adjusting to the new camp became brisk at this time; memories fade a bit over the years. The point is that Twentynine Palms was coming to life as a new major facility in the desert.

\*\*Force Troop and "base" commanders then, and through the successor of Brink, Colonel John S. Oldfield, actually and legally were detached commands. Commanding officers had legal jurisdiction for "office hours" and lower-level courts-martial. General courts-martial jurisdiction remained with the respective commanding generals at Pendleton. A bit later, as we shall see, a commanding general of Force Troops, Pacific, moved from Pendleton up to Twentynine Palms, and thus took his own general court jurisdiction with him. Base status for Twentynine Palms, which came early in 1957, made it in all respects a "base" with complete legal and fiscal jurisdiction and responsibility.

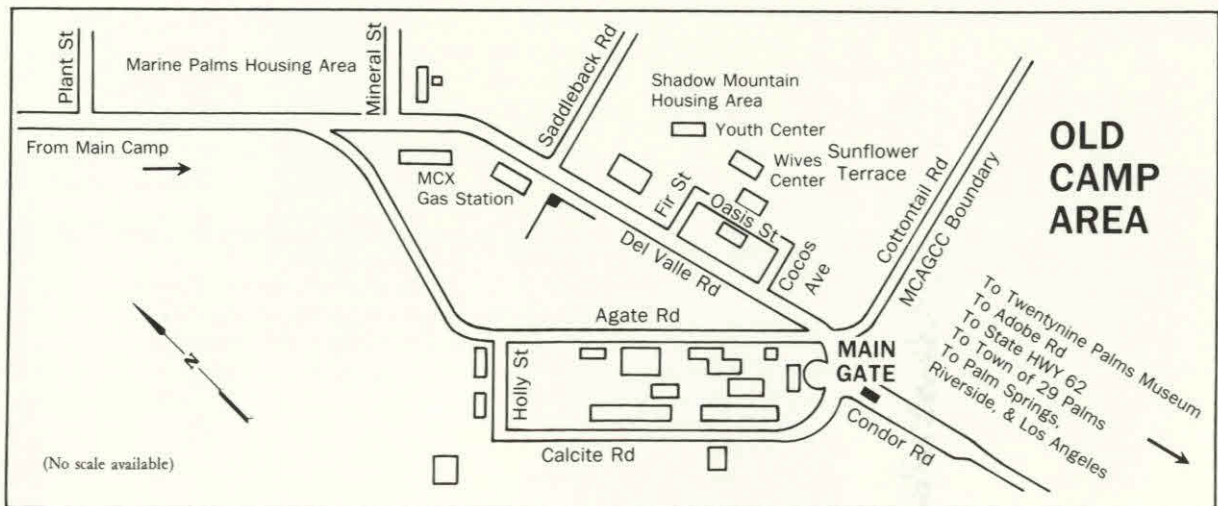


Naval District, Navy Captain Donald F. Kelly, from San Diego. By this time the Twentynine Palms parade ground had taken on its mid-1980s configuration (before Sturgis Road crossed it).

At the top of the slope stood the newly-cast headquarters building, looking westward to the snow caps of San Gorgonio and San Jacinto. The chapels faced each other across the parade. Below them stood the clubs for enlisted Marines—from the lower ranks to sergeant on one side, to the staff NCO club on the other. At Brown Road, beyond the clubs, was the base “civic center” of post office, post exchange, bank, and theater. It was a base of which to be proud, even—or perhaps because of—its frontier-like setting on that previously desolate hillside which Colonel Brink had so disliked.

The chapels were buildings of great beauty and simplicity. Hereafter, whenever I escorted VIPs around the Base, which was often, I took them through one of the chapels first, then to the theater and finally to one of the messhalls. By that time they were convinced that remarkable things could be done with concrete.<sup>4</sup>

Colonel Brink, who started a tradition during his tour in Twentynine Palms by being grand marshal of Pioneer Days parades on horseback (although later commanders have mostly ridden in open autos), was winding down his desert duty. Although he continued to live in old quarters in the Condor Field buildings near the main gate, most other activities and units had moved into new concrete buildings. In the fall of 1954, some four grades of elementary school held classes in those old buildings, since a growing population of Ma-



rine juniors had put the meager town school building facilities into over-capacity. Even then, the help was not sufficient, and double sessions had to be held in those make-shift school rooms.\*

By late 1954 a number of things cast shadows toward Twentynine Palms. Monte Brink neared retirement. Colonel John S. Oldfield, Basic School Class of '35 classmate of Tom Ivey, wound up his tour as commanding officer of the 11th Marines in Korea, and needed a new assignment. Commands at Pendleton owned the most artillery units at the first major stop east of Korea; but for west coast artillery, all roads now led to Twentynine Palms. Pendleton "seconded" Barney Oldfield toward Twentynine Palms, after some leave, to arrive late in 1954.\*\* And meanwhile, with so many west coast FMF units now up at Twentynine Palms, Brigadier Joe Earnshaw's command at Pendleton began to seem lonely. He decided, however, not to move to the desert, but the officer slated to replace him in the summer of 1955, Brigadier General Thomas G. McFarland (then assistant commander of the 3d Marine Division in Japan) thought he might move his command post to Twentynine Palms.

Also, at about the time Colonel Brink prepared to leave, the officer who had replaced Scantling as executive officer, Lieutenant Colonel Marshal R. "Ray" Pilcher headed for transfer and retirement. This provided an opening for Fred Scantling, soon to return from duty with the 3d Marine Division in the Far East (in mid-1955), to become executive officer for Barney Oldfield. It provided a team which made for a very effective command and management through the transition period from late 1954 to full base status for Twentynine Palms.

The Brink-Oldfield change of command took place on 29 December 1954. Colonel Brink went back down to Pendleton where he prepared for retirement, and Colonel Oldfield and his wife moved into a house which Tom Ivey had arranged to be available for them

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\*Mr. Schoolmaster in Twentynine Palms then, and for many years both fore and aft of the time, was Ted Hayes, a delightful and scholarly old rascal of plain talk, good company, and great stories. He recalled in the mid-1980s that, back in the post-World-War-II days before the Marines took over in 1952, San Bernardino thought about taking over the old base as a part of the school facilities for Twentynine Palms. Turned it down, though, Ted recalled. The buildings were not stressed to withstand earthquakes. Those one-story frame buildings were about as prone to earthquake damage as an orange crate. But that decision saved the place for the Marine Corps, Ted said.

\*\*This was an era when anyone named Oldfield got nicknamed "Barney" after a famous driver on early auto race tracks. "John Sherman Oldfield" lost out to "Barney" during the Basic School Class of 1935.

out in town. Although much of the base construction now was winding down, at least in its first major increment, there was not yet much improvement in on-base housing. Construction of what later was to become the Marine Palms housing area had just scratched the desert, and so the trailers and relocatables remained. In the mid-1980s, Oldfield recalled that there were then, when he came on board, about 7,000 enlisted Marines at Twentynine, the bulk of them being Force Troops personnel. As has been noted, more housing was available in the town; and into the bargain some slow growth in the town reflected the boost to local economy which came from the base and its growing population.

Noting this economic linkage, the Joshua Tree Monument National Bank, a small, privately held bank "chain" with its main high desert facility in Twentynine Palms, opened a service branch on the base, on 20 January 1955, early in the tenure of Barney Oldfield. Bank owner and president Joseph P. Wasserburger came to the base for ceremonies, Camp Pendleton base commander General Selden came up; Colonels Oldfield and Ivey were there. With General Selden, portending things to come for Twentynine Palms, was Colonel Randall M. Victory, then assistant base commander at Pendleton. Later, as a brigadier general, Victory became the second commanding general of the new base at Twentynine Palms, following commanding general number one, Tom McFarland.

On this day, welcoming the bank facility to the base, ribbons were cut and brief words of dedication and welcome were spoken. Service, security, progress, community cooperation, convenience, all were lauded or promised. No more did citizens, town or base, think themselves a frontier or a desert version of the wild west. But in a bit less than six months came the infamous Twentynine Palms bank caper. Neither a Jesse James nor a Bonnie and Clyde affair, the event nonetheless caused an exasperating inconvenience for a number of days, a subject for gossip and speculation for months, and a water shed episode which forever after separated early-day-Marines (and townspeople) from those who came later when civilization, no doubt about it, really arrived.

On Monday morning, 24 July 1955, base and town re-opened after a seemingly uneventful weekend, but then almost at once the two-year-old dial telephones in both communities began to ring off the bulkheads, said Marines and townspeople who remember the day. In town and on the base, facilities of the Joshua Tree Monument National Bank—the only bank in the communities—had been locked up tighter than new boots by Federal bank examiners. Shortages figured

to go over a half million dollars, rumor had it. (Later official word put the deficit at \$678,000.) And the FBI was looking for the Twentynine Palms manager of the bank, Roscoe D. Coons. They soon found him, a 47-year-old \$6,000-a-year man, at Del Mar, that race track down toward San Diego once advertised by an early owner, Bing Crosby, as the track where turf meets surf. In Twentynine Palms, Roscoe and Betty Coons lived on a modest scale. At Del Mar, the FBI found them at their B & R Stables. Roscoe Coons not only played the ponies, he owned a five-head clutch of them.

Marines and townspeople had a few anxious and inconvenient days, with no way to write checks or withdraw money. Many stores extended credit to Marine families and townspeople alike. The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) soon set up temporary shop to give depositors limited access to limited funds for health and comfort items. Not long after that, the Citizens National Trust and Savings Bank of Riverside (later assimilated by the present Security Pacific Bank) was authorized by the Federal authorities to open emergency facilities on the base and in the town. Finally, on Wednesday, 3 August 1955, Citizens Trust re-opened that once proud Joshua Monument National Bank branch on the base, and things got back to normal.\*

Roscoe Coons was indicted by a Federal grand jury on 21 September on 25 counts of embezzlement. He eventually pleaded guilty to eight counts, and in April of 1956 was found guilty, fined \$20,000, and sentenced to 20 years in prison. If his race horses seldom finished well, neither did he. Broken in spirit and health, Roscoe Coons died not long after he went off to prison.

Meanwhile, in the week before the bank closed, Brigadier General Thomas G. McFarland moved his Force Troops command post from Pendleton to the desert. On 1 July, he had replaced Joe Earnshaw at the command; and as has been noted, had determined it was time for the command to follow the bulk of its units—most of them of the artillery family—out to Twentynine Palms. Colonel Oldfield remained commanding officer of the “base,” still technically the Ma-

rine Corps Training Center under Camp Pendleton.

Also in the life-goes-on department, on Thursday of that week of the bank closing, Colonel Oldfield and officials of the P. I. Wilsey Company of Long Beach cut the ribbon to mark the opening of the Marine Palms housing area. These were home-style versions of the concrete tilt-up techniques, and Wilsey and company brought in 483 units for just a bit under \$4 million dollars. Actually, the contract was for \$3,988,000 and included streets, sidewalks, sewers, lights along the streets and, of course, in the homes, giant swamp coolers on the roofs for desert air conditioning, the works for a complete suburb.

A later commanding general at Twentynine Palms, surveying what progress had wrought by the mid-1970s when the base got a new name and a new mission, called the place of the early years “a sleepy little artillery base.” Many Marines of that period would go after him with aiming stakes. Far from sleepy, the artillery people “wore out the tubes” training on their vast expanse of desert in the waning days of the Korean War period when budgets and manning levels still remained healthy. Nor was there much napping for Colonel Oldfield’s base Marines, “housekeepers” for an ever-expanding “house.” Now there were clubs to manage, a post exchange system, swimming pools, the theater, special service activities, base stables, a modest inter-base athletic program, ranges, ammunition bunkers, base maintenance, new construction budgets to justify and supervise, messhalls, medical and dental facilities expanding, and cooperation with the civilian community where schools for dependents drew Federal “impact” funds.

In the midst of all this, and early in 1956, came the least sleepy day of all for Barney Oldfield and Fred Scantling—plus a number of others at Twentynine and at El Toro. Although the “need to know” list was kept to an absolute minimum, and no one ever suggested a plaque ought to be put up, a designation never thought of at the time might have become “The Day They Re-named the Mountain.” In those early artillery days, many firing exercises began from bivouac out near Surprise Springs. If a convoy came up from Pendleton, it turned north on the Sunfair Road, some distance west of the town of Twentynine Palms, and headed into the base area generally toward a lone mountain then called Pinto Mountain. There were other mountains in the area then sometimes called the Pinto Mountains (plural). These actually were the Bullion, the Sheep Hole, and the edges of the Pinto Basin, the latter actually in eastern reaches of the Joshua Tree National Monument. On the day in ques-

\*Of the bank closing, Brigadier General Oldfield says: “I had written a check to the IRS (Internal Revenue Service) in June 1955 to pay my quarterly [income tax] payment. But when the bank was closed, my check bounced, and the IRS threatened me with all things bad. I then had to send a cashier’s check since the IRS now wouldn’t accept my check, even on another bank. A major problem also was the fact that Marines were delayed five days in receiving their pay since we had to make up new payrolls. Otherwise, . . . nearly everyone in town liked Roscoe Coons, and most were sorry to see him in a jam. He had befriended many people.”



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A366762

*Col Spencer S. Berger, right, Commanding Officer, 7th Marines, discusses the operation of a machine gun with members of Company G, 3d Battalion, who acted as aggressors during DesFEx III, one of several field exercises held during the winter of 1956.*

tion, all of this confusing desert terrain conspired to cause Marine aircraft from El Toro to dump a string of bombs off the reservation, generally along the highway—just east of the town of Twentynine Palms. To the credit of a suspicious flight leader, who has been frequently blessed even if his name cannot be recalled, the bombs went out locked in the safe setting. There were five or six of the “hummers” (to use a term from a later period) and almost before the dust settled Barney Oldfield (a cool-headed man who earned the Silver Star Medal on Iwo Jima), was on the horn with old friend Colonel Michael Sampas, the chief of staff at El Toro.

As Oldfield recalled much later, this was in that frightful spring of 1956 just after six recruits drowned in a tragic training accident at Ribbon Creek at Parris Island. The Marine Corps walked on eggs then, for really the first time that anyone could remember—going clear back to at least prior to World War I. Suddenly, in the aftermath of Ribbon Creek, it had become a Marine Corps with a bad press. Barney Oldfield and Mike Sampas, not wanting to contribute more to this, held their breath, sent explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) teams out along the road, brought in all the unexploded bombs, and then breathed a collective sigh of relief. And it was then, or very shortly thereafter, that the mountain became known as Hidalgo.

“I guess we got away with it,” Fred Scantling said many years later. But present at the same gathering was Chet Ellis, husband of Blanche Ellis who “centralized” that long-ago telephone switchboard, and who collected great stories about Joshua Trees and many other highlights and lowlights of desert history. Chet, who in those early years had been president of the Twentynine Palms Chamber of Commerce, smiled knowingly, but shook his head. “We knew about it,” he said, “but we were rooting for you all the way.” Which, over the years, sums up quite well the cooperative spirit which has prevailed between the town and “its” base.

And this “day they renamed the mountain” is not to be confused with another slightly less frightening day, “the day of the drone.” On that occasion, Barney Oldfield recalled, an airborne target drone went AWOL, did a “Horace Greeley” westbound toward populated regions of San Bernardino county, and soon zoomed out of sight. General Oldfield recalled that the California Highway Patrol was called, and “then we sat and waited for bad news.” None came. Remains of the wayward drone were found weeks later in the mountains, where it crashed harmlessly.

If this was the wild west, it brought enjoyment to no one. Clearly, Twentynine Palms no longer was an artillery bivouac in the uncharted outback. More man-

power was needed for a number of things. Excellent leadership had been on hand from the outset, but often commanders were forced to have to get by on the cheap. Clearly there was greater potential in this vast expanse of desert than initially had been thought. Time had come for complete command autonomy, to cut apron strings from Camp Pendleton.

By the end of 1956 the Marine Corps had weathered pretty well the bewildering period of the Ribbon Creek tragedy. The bile slick of unpopularity of the Korean War began to fade from the civilian front's memory. In the Middle East, President Nasser of Egypt began

to court the Russians with a cotton-for-arms deal, signed up the Soviets to build his Aswan dam, and then recognized Communist China—a move the U.S. tried to thwart wherever it could. Then, match dangerously close to fuse, the British and French on 31 October 1956 followed Israeli forces into the Suez in an attempt to prevent Nasser from turning back time to an age of no-canal. A majority of U.S. voters decided they still liked Ike, and that military forces had best be looked to again. Time to build. The Training Center at Twentynine Palms prepared to become a new Marine Corps base.

































































































































