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History



The airfield at Naval Air Station Fallon is named after Lieutenant Commander Bruce Avery Van Voorhis, Nevada's only native-born Medal of Honor recipient.

Naval Air Station Fallon traces its origins to 1942, when the Civil Aviation Administration and the Army Air Corps began construction of four airfields in the Nevada desert. As part of the Western Defense Program, initiated to repel an expected Japanese attack on the west coast, runways and lighting systems were built in Winnemucca, Minden, Lovelock and Fallon.

As the war in the Pacific developed, the Navy recognized a need to train its pilots in a realistic environment using all the tactics and weapons currently being developed. Fallon was the Navy's choice. In 1943, the Navy assumed control of the two 5,200 foot runways. Construction soon began on barracks, hangars, air traffic control facilities and target ranges. On June 10, 1944, Naval Auxiliary Air Station Fallon was commissioned. Training operations reached a peak in the summer of 1945 when an average of 21,000 take-offs and landings were recorded and more than 12,000 flight hours logged at the station. Ironically, just as construction of the initial airfield project was completed and the training program was going full gear, the Japanese surrendered and brought an untimely end to N.A.A.S. Fallon. Eight months after the completion of a new 24-unit housing project, five months after a new gym was built and only three months following the opening of a new Commissary, N.A.A.S. Fallon was placed in a "reduced operation status." One month later, on Feb. 1, 1946, the facility was further reduced to a "maintenance status." On June 1, 1946 it was in a "caretaker status" and the official designation of Naval Auxiliary Air Station removed.

For the next five years, the Bureau of Indian Services used the facility. Buildings once used by pilots to prepare to meet the challenge from the deck of a pitching aircraft carrier disappeared. The swimming pool, once the scene of Sailors attempting to escape the Nevada summer heat, became a home for pigs.

The Korean conflict brought new life to the small desert installation. Once again, the Navy found reason to train pilots in the new sophisticated jet aircraft. In 1951, Fallon became an Auxiliary Landing Field for N.A.S. Alameda Calif. On Oct. 1, 1953, N.A.A.S. Fallon was reestablished by order of the Secretary of the Navy. The present day bombing ranges, Bravo 16, 17 and 19, were also created that year.

Over the next 30 years the Fallon air station grew to become one of the premier training sites for Navy and Marine Corps pilots and ground crews. New hangars, ramps, housing and other facilities sprang up to give the installation new and greater capabilities.

The airfield became known as Van Voorhis Field in 1958, named after Lt. Commander Bruce A. Van Voorhis, a Fallon native who received the Congressional Medal of Honor posthumously for service in the South Pacific during World War II.

The airfield's most sophisticated range, the electronic warfare range, was established in 1967.

On Jan. 1, 1972, the Navy recognized Fallon's importance to naval aviation by upgrading the base to a major aviation command, and thus, Naval Air Station Fallon was commissioned.

During the 1980s the air station experienced dramatic growth, as a state-of-the-art air traffic control facility and new hangars were constructed. In response to challenges faced by deployed air wings in conducting contingency strike operations from aircraft carriers in the Mediterranean Sea into Lebanon, the Navy constructed a new training center. In 1984, the Naval Strike Warfare Center was established to be the primary authority for integrated strike warfare tactical development and training. It quickly became the "graduate level" training evolution that air wings go through during their inter-deployment training cycle: after completing the four week training course in Fallon, an air wing was ready for combat anywhere in the world.

In 1985, Fallon received a new tool to aid in its aircrews training: the Tactical Aircrew Combat Training System or TACTS. This system provides squadrons, carrier air wings and students from the Naval Strike Warfare Center with visual, graphic displays of their missions eliminating guess work. Strike Fighter Squadron 127, the "Desert Bogeys" aggressors moved to N.A.S. Fallon in 1987, becoming the air station's only permanently based squadron.

During the 1990s the base continued to expand its role as the pinnacle of Naval Aviation tactical training. A new hangar, ramp and academic building were built in 1995 to accommodate the arrival of Navy Fighter Weapons School (TOPGUN) and Carrier Airborne Early Warning Weapons School (Top Dome) from San Diego to Fallon in early 1996.

In July 1996, The Naval Strike and Air Warfare Center (NSAWC) was commissioned, combining the functions of TOPGUN, the Carrier Airborne Early Warning Weapons School and the Naval Strike Warfare Center into one command under a two-star admiral. The training center has continued to instruct all aspects of tactical integrated air warfare, including air wing training detachments, TOPGUN classes, E-2 Hawkeye mission commander courses, as well as developing advancements in tactics and procedures.

CBMU 303, a Seabee construction maintenance unit, also relocated to Fallon in 1996. Known as the "Fighting Saints," Fighter Composite Squadron Thirteen (VFC-13), replaced VFA-127 as the adversary squadron at Fallon, taking over the duties of the disestablishing Desert Bogeys in flying F-5 Tiger IIs that same year.

NAS Fallon moved into the twenty first century with a continued commitment to Naval Aviation. From the formulation of the Navy's first "Encroachment Action Plan" to the holding of the first Operational Assurance Forum, NAS Fallon has been in the forefront of preserving the existing training areas while planning to meet future requirements. These long range visions together with the current combination of the base's facilities, the air space available for training over Northern Nevada and the unsurpassed air-to-ground and electronic warfare ranges make NAS Fallon integral to keeping America's Naval Forces trained and ready now and into the future.

VAN VOORHIS FIELD

A Legacy of Honor

Naval Air Station Fallon is known among the locals simply as 'the base,' and few are familiar with the airfield's real name or the man for whom the field is named. In fact, the airfield represents a memorial to a WWII naval aviation hero and recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor. Lieutenant Commander Bruce Avery Van Voorhis, the airfield's namesake, was born in Aberdeen, Wash., on Jan. 29, 1908. Shortly thereafter he moved with his family to Fallon, Nev., where he spent his childhood. His father served as the Indian Service Representative at Stillwater. Van Voorhis attended school at the Oats Park Grade School and later graduated from Churchill County High School in 1924 where his classmates also knew him as "Clint."

He was a 1929 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis and earned his pilot wings in 1931. Van Voorhis served with numerous aviation units stateside and overseas. He reported for duty to Bombing Squadron 102 as Plane Commander of a PB4Y-1 at the height of conflict in the Pacific during WWII.

Van Voorhis died on July 6, 1943, near Hare Island of the Kapingamarangi Atoll in the southernmost area of the Eastern Carolina Islands in the Western Pacific. After a 700-mile flight alone, he launched successive bombing and strafing attacks on Japanese ground installations, destroying a radio station, anti-aircraft emplacement and at least four enemy aircraft in the air and on the water in six successive ground level attacks. He was caught in his own bomb blast and crashed into a lagoon, ending his heroic, single-handed strike.

The Air Station was dedicated in his name on Nov. 1, 1959. At that time the 14,000-foot runway was one of the longest in the world and remains the longest in the Navy. In 1956, 13 years after Van Voorhis' death, a destroyer escort was launched bearing his name (DD-1028) from the shipyard in Camden, N.J. The ship was in service throughout the world for 17 years, including participation in the naval blockade of Cuba in 1962, before being decommissioned in 1972. In 1982, then Governor of Nevada, Robert List, issued a proclamation designating May 31 as LCDR Bruce Avery Van Voorhis Day in the state of Nevada.

As the names of a new generation of heroes is written in the history books, Americans can look back gratefully at the heritage left by those who came before and know that this country is no stranger to the cost of freedom. The list of those willing to fight, and die, to pay that price is long and continues through every chapter of America's history. Among that list of names is Nevada's own LCDR Bruce Avery Van Voorhis.

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