

The Morro Bay Amphibious Training Base, 1941-1947

When one thinks about Morro Bay, it is often only thought of as an area for tourists or a place to try one's luck fishing; however, it has a hidden history behind it. Even though little of this history is left on display, there was actually a military base on the harbor of Morro Bay. Known as the US Naval Amphibious Training Base, it played a vital role in the training of American troops during WWII.

On November 16, 1941, construction of the base began on land originally covered in willows.¹

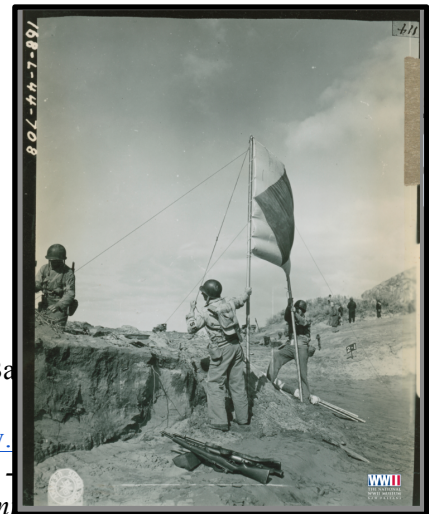
Once the trees were cleared, the Navy built supporting buildings, deepened the bay, created the jetty, placed piers, and created the Embarcadero.² As a part of base construction, the

Navy built a new waterworks system for the city, a 200-foot loading dock with a 60,000 square foot concrete shoulder, a large metal pontoon dock, and a 250-foot T-shaped pier with a 15-foot-tall frame barrier to simulate the side of a ship.³ In order to provide easy access to the sandspit, a wooden trestle bridge was also built (Figure 1⁴). The bridge was eventually taken down in 1946, but some pillars remain, and can still be seen on the sandspit.

The training that went on at the Morro Bay base was like no other. Specific to WWII and the Pacific front, it emphasized “amphibious landing, storming beaches, [and] transporting men, machines, and supplies from ship to shore,”⁵ as well as training for traditional warfare. Then-residents of Morro Bay, Art Criddle and Edith Ross can remember “fighter aircraft coming 20 feet over and strafing these guys,” explaining that, “they would strafe with something like flour, and if the flour hit you, you were dead.”⁶ Additionally, soldiers



Figure 1: Soldiers carry supplies across wooden trestle bridge between the dock and the sandspit. Photo courtesy of the Digital Collections of the National WWII Museum



¹ Bassett, James, Jr. “Activities of Morro Bay Amphibious Training Base.” *San Luis Obispo Telegram - Tribune*, 10 June 1944. Print.

² “Harbor Development During World War Two.” *Harbor.html*, www.ww2online.org/image/81st-infantry-division-soldiers-boarding-lcvps-during-amphibious-training-exercises-san-luis-obispo-california-on-15-march-1944

³ “Navy Speeds Morro Bay Base Project.” *San Luis Obispo Telegram - Tribune*, 10 June 1944. Print.

⁴ DuTiel. *81st Infantry Division Soldiers Boarding LCVPs During Amphibious Training Exercises - San Luis Obispo, California on 15 March 1944*. San Luis Obispo, CA, 15 Mar. 1944. The Digital Collections of the National WWII Museum. <https://www.ww2online.org/image/81st-infantry-division-soldiers-boarding-lcvps-during-amphibious-training-exercises-san-luis-obispo-california-on-15-march-1944>

⁵ Bassett.

⁶ Ross, Edith, and Criddle, Art (28 May 2018). WWII childhood memories - amphibious training & D-Day Memorial (Tom Wilmer, Interviewer). [Audio Clip]. Retrieved from www.kcbx.org/post/wwii-childhood-memories-amphibious-training-d-day-memorial#stream/0.

would be sequestered at sea for long periods of time, in order to acclimate the men to the rocking of the boats and prevent seasickness. Once unloaded onto the beaches, they would try to take over forts and mock villages (Figure 2⁷), and would repeatedly “invade” the Morro Beach Inn.⁸ New trainees would often take an entire day to complete the tasks, but well-trained soldiers could do the same in only a few hours. After a few weeks of rigorous training, one group would leave and another group of green soldiers would take their place, continuing the cycle. These troops would eventually go on to fight for the Allied powers in Normandy, the Philippines, and Japan. In total, the base served to train over 45,000 men and 5,000 officers from all branches of the military during its three years of operation.⁹

The base was decommissioned on October 31, 1945, and more than 175 landing craft were moved to other bases and supply depots.¹⁰ The men who had trained there were transferred away, many of them to the station at Fort Worden, Washington, and the base was given over to the US Coast Guard to be



Figure 3: The “Stacks” loom over Morro Bay to this day. Photo courtesy of the New York Times.

maintained. Ten years later, the Morro Bay Power Plant was

built over it, providing

not only

power to the city of Morro Bay but also jobs and funds in the middle of an economic recession.¹¹ In

2014, the power plant was abandoned, leaving behind Morro Bay’s famous “Stacks” (Figure 3¹²).

Today, Morro Bay’s culture is completely different from its wartime past, and it now serves as a popular tourist destination and a major source of fish for the San Luis Obispo County.

Figure 2: A shore patrol sets up signal flags during a training exercise. Photo courtesy of the Digital Collections of the National WWII Museum

⁷ Henschel. *Shore Patrol Setting Up Signal Flags During Amphibious Training in Morro Bay, California on 25 February 1944*. Morro Bay, CA, 25 Feb. 1944. The Digital Collections of the National WWII Museum. <https://www.ww2online.org/image/shore-patrol-setting-signal-flags-during-amphibious-training-exercises-morro-bay-california-25>

⁸ Middlecamp, David. “Morro Bay Trained Island Invaders during World War II.” *San Luis Obispo Tribune*, 6 Nov. 2015, www.sanluisobispo.com/news/local/news-columns-blogs/photos-from-the-vault/article43471959.html.

⁹ “Harbor Development...”

¹⁰ “Men to Leave Base October 31 Hartt Reveals.” *San Luis Obispo Telegram - Tribune*, 20 October 1945. Print.

¹¹ Nagourney, Adam. “A Power Plant in California Goes Quiet, but the Stacks Still Tower.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 24 Nov. 2014, www.nytimes.com/2014/11/24/us/a-power-plant-in-california-goes-quiet-but-the-stacks-still-tower.html.

¹² Nagourney.

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