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Building Toward World War II

Published September 24th, 2026

President Roosevelt gave us the common story of the start of World War II with his 'Day of Infamy' speech the day after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The attack was a surprise when it happened (though the degree of surprise is still debated). We had been preparing for war in the Pacific for a long time, so Pearl Harbor was not a surprise in the broadest **strategic** sense.

The industrialization and militarization of Japan during the Meiji Restoration beginning 1868, and its 1905 victory in the Russo-Japanese War announced the rise of an aggressive force in Asia. American military planners began developing strategic plans for conducting a war against Japan in 1924 and revised them many times, as late as 1938.

The plans included describing the military resources needed to defend the West Coast and to support a war in the Pacific. During that time-period the planners assumed that the war would consist of a deadly slog hopping from island to island, culminating in a decisive naval battle. The deadly slog happened, although technology rendered the events of the war differently, beginning at Pearl Harbor. Air power, not battleships, created the Japanese success in Hawaii.

San Luis Obispo County was part of the buildup on the West Coast. Camp Merriam, later called Camp San Luis Obispo, was established in 1928 at its current location as the first home of the California Army National Guard. The US Army took over the

Camp in 1940, modifying it extensively to accommodate a training mission. Eventually, it could host 10,000 trainees at a time.

The Camp expanded to almost 15,000 acres, including 8,810 acres for the Baywood Park Training Area that was used for maneuvering and live fire training.

Unexpended ammunition was a concern that the Army Corps of Engineers addressed several times and warnings are still in place even though the threat is low.

Camp San Luis Obispo facilities have been changed a lot since the end of the war (and the Korean War) but they are still used. The US Army returned the base to the California National Guard in 1965 when it included about 5,800 acres. The remaining land was given to public uses (like Cuesta College) or returned to its private owners.

An even larger base was built in 1940 as Camp Roberts (named after WWI Medal of Honor recipient Corporal Harold W Roberts). Located at the northern boundary of SLO County on both sides of the Salinas River, this huge base trained up to 30,000 soldiers at a time or a total of about 436,000 during the war. Camp Roberts has been run by the California Army National Guard since 1971 and hosts the Camp Roberts Historical Museum.

Preparation for the war also included the Navy Section Base in Morro Bay that was dedicated on November 16, 1941, just 3 weeks before Pearl Harbor. Using fill from the estuary, the Navy built new land in the estuary where about 45,000 soldiers were trained for amphibious assault in 1944-45. They were preparing for the island-hopping war that was envisioned in plans 20 years old.

On November 7th, the Military Officers Association of America will sponsor an even to commemorate the 85th anniversary of the dedication of the Navy Section Base. This public event will be saturated with the history of the war on the Central Coast. Sign up for emails at historicalmorrobay.org to get updates.

Photo source: If you have a story or photo to share about the history of Estero Bay, please contact info@historicalmorrobay.org.

[Estero Bay News](#). Do you have an amazing photo-story to share? We'd love to hear from you about that or anything else about our shared history: admin@historicalmorrobay.org.