PT. SUR NAVAL FACILITY, PT. SUR, CA: A BRIEF HISTORY

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The Significance of the Point Sur Naval Facility.

According to the dictionary, significance is “the quality of being important.” In the field of historic preservation the word has a special meaning. Assessing significance involves determining the importance of a historic resource, whether a building, site, or something else, within the broad sweep of history. To do this, the resource must be placed into a historic context. A historic context is a backdrop within which a historic resource can be viewed. One cannot look at a building in a vacuum, it must be looked at in the broader context within which it exists. From this historic context, the relative importance of a resource can be determined.

Point Sur's Role in the Winning of the Cold War.

During the Cold War as the Soviet Union rapidly built-up its submarine force, U.S. antisubmarine warfare took on a growing significance. One critical American development was pioneering detection of low frequency submarine sound propagation in the sea. This led to development of the Sound Surveillance System (SOSUS), which were employed at Naval Facilities (NAVFACs) across the globe. SOSUS greatly assisted the U.S. in maintaining its dominance in anti-submarine warfare, and was critical to American efforts to win the Cold War. Established in 1957, the Pt. Sur NAVFAC is one of the few remaining complete Naval Facilities, and the only one remaining on the west coast. While other Naval Facilities were parts of larger military complexes, Pt. Sur was established as a stand-alone, self-sufficient base. [1] This historically significant facility is an important reminder of American ingenuity in the struggle against the Soviet Union.

Point Sur's Mission.

While an active facility, the Pt. Sur Naval Facility's mission was described as: "NAVFAC Point Sur is a small self-supporting station engaged in oceanographic research. The mission is to conduct observations in selected areas in order to provide the U. S. Navy with more extensive information on oceanographic conditions in those areas." [2]

In layman's terms, Pt. Sur was once part of the worldwide SOSUS network of defensive listening stations that tracked the movement of Soviet submarines.

A Short History of Pt. Sur.

"Naval Facility Point Sur, California was commissioned 8 January 1958. During its twenty-six years of operation, it provided continuous support to Undersea Surveillance. Located twenty-five miles south of Monterey, California along scenic Highway 1, the facility was manned by ten officers, ninety-six enlisted and 18 civilians. The command was awarded the Meritorious Unit Commendation in 1969, the Efficiency "E" in both 1977 and 1983, and was also rated as the top Naval Facility in 1983 by COSP, achieving the system's first "clean sweep" of operations, maintenance, and efficiency awards given by the task group commander. NAVFAC Point Sur was decommissioned 1 October 1984 upon remoting to NAVFAC Centerville Beach." [3] **At that time, the U. S. Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) in Monterey, CA took over the housing at Pt. Sur. All Navy activities ceased with the closure of Pt. Sur Naval Facility in 1988.** [4]

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[1] California State Parks official web site at http://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=565.
[2] U.S. Naval Facility Point Sur Big Sur CA Master Plan, 24 August, 1981, Commanding Officer, Western Division, Naval Facilities Engineering Command, P. O. Box 727, San Bruno, CA 94066. pg. D-1.
[3] http://www.cus.navy.mil/NAVFAC%20Point%20Sur.htm
[4] Review Environmental Assessment: The Disposal and Reuse of Naval Facility Centerville Beach, California and Naval Facility Point Sur, California, Western Division Naval Facilities Engineering Command, 900 Commodore Drive, San Bruno, CA 94066, pg. 5-2

Only 24 Naval Facilities were established by the U. S. Navy. [5]

The facility occupied forty-seven acres, most of which was acquired in 1956. The base was composed of fourteen structures and twenty-eight buildings on the base proper built in 1957. Twenty-four military family housing units, built in 1960, are on an adjacent section of the site. The military complement in 1981 consisted of 13 officers, 85 enlisted personnel, 45 military dependents, and 18 civilian staff for a total personnel base loading of 161. [6]

In September 1993, NPS requested transfer of the Terminal Equipment Building (TEB) along with associated easements for the main road, the cable system and some utilities. [7] This request was granted and NPS now owns the TEB and has the requested easements.

On July 7, 1997 the federal General Services Administration issued a public notice that the Point Sur Naval Facility had been determined surplus Government property and that it was available for disposal. The notice included notification that the Naval Support Activity, Monterey would retain ownership of the 1.17 acres parcel that included the Terminal Equipment Building, two supporting structures, and the easements mentioned above. [8]

By letter dated July 25, 1997, the California Department of Parks and Recreation notified the U. S. General Services Administration of its desire to acquire the Point Sur Naval facility. [9] The formal request was submitted on January 29, 1998. [10] The NAVFAC property was transferred to State Parks on March 10, 2000. It was acquired as an addition to Point Sur SHP. [11]

Point Sur's Role in the Development of the Sound Surveillance System (SOSUS).

Even before the Pt. Sur Naval Facility was established, the Pt. Sur area played an important part in ocean acoustics and undersea surveillance.

New discoveries in low frequency sound propagation in the sea were made during the latter part of, and immediately after World War II. One of the first discoveries was the existence of a deep sound channel that trapped and focused low frequency sound, allowing it to propagate over great distances. The channel was referred to as the Sound Fixing and Ranging (SOFAR) channel, and was first used to locate downed

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[5] http://www.cus.navy.mil/paofiles/IUSS_History-U.pdf
[6] Ibid. pg. B-1.
[7] Review Environmental Assessment, pg. 5-2.
[8] General Services Administration, Region 9, Phillip Burton Federal Building and U. S. Courthouse, 450 Golden Gate Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94102-3400 NOTICE OF SURPLUS DETERMINATION – GOVERNMENT REAL PROPERTY, Former Naval Facility Point Sur, Monterey County, California, GSA Control No. 9-N-CA-1480, dated July 7, 1997
[9] California Department of Parks and Recreation, Monterey District letter dated July 25, 1997.
[10] California Department of Parks and Recreation, Monterey District Application for Federal Surplus Property for Public Park or Recreation Purposes letter dated January 29, 1998.
[11] E-mail dated 1 FEB 2010 from Mr. Ken Gray, District Services Manager, Monterey District, California State Parks.

aviators at sea. The technology, however, was applied in development of the SOSUS, which was a network of seabed listening devices deployed to detect submarines in the deep SOFAR channel. In 1950, the Navy's Office of Naval Research instituted a program to have Bell Labs develop SOSUS.

At the same time, the Navy developed antisubmarine submarines, or SSKs, which also used passive low frequency acoustic arrays. Shore-based monitoring stations became the preferred application, as they were safer than sea-based stations (i.e. ships), and were impervious to foul weather and ambient self-generated noise.

"Early in 1949, the Naval Research Laboratory reported submarine detection ranges of 10-15 NM in tests using SOFAR hydrophones off Point Sur, California." [12] The Navy used a WWII era barracks building at the **Pt. Sur Lightstation** to conduct the test. This early system consisted of three or more hydrophone configurations placed on the sea floor to pick up low frequency sounds. "By the end of the year, ranges of several hundred miles had been achieved." [13]

Further data collected off Pt. Sur led to development of the Wentz Curves for underwater acoustics. [14] Wentz Curves are plots of the average ambient noise spectra for different levels of shipping traffic, or sea state conditions (or wind speeds). These curves make it possible to identify ship or submarine sounds through the ambient noise in the sea.

In 1950, the Navy initiated Project Hartwell, which sought to develop a long-range acoustic detection sensor system using bottom arrays. The following year, Project Jezebel utilized a 6-element test array of Low Frequency Ranging (LOFAR) components installed by Western Electric at Eleuthera in the Bahamas. At roughly the same time, Project Michael was undertaken by Columbia's Hudson Lab. In 1952, the Navy planned to expand the system to nine stations, and the term Sound Surveillance System (SOSUS) was used for the first time. It was code-named Caesar in order to cover installation and production. The SOSUS system consisted of bottom mounted hydrophone arrays connected to facilities on shore via undersea communication cables. The cables were connected to shore Naval Facilities where the signals were processed. Evaluation centers were also established to assess the data received from the various NAVFACs. The arrays were installed in locations across the globe that allowed undistorted long-range acoustic propagation. The SOSUS system was designed to detect the low frequency ranges of a submarine's sound spectrum. The arrays were placed along the axis of the SOFAR channel, in order to best receive these low frequency sounds[15].

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[12] From "Origins of Sound Surveillance System (SOSUS)" on the official website of Commander, Undersea Warfare: http://www.cus.navy.mil/sosus.htm
[13] Ibid.
[14] Phone conversation with Mr. Chris Miller, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA on15 JAN 2010.
[15] Cote, Owen R., Jr., pg, 13, The Third Battle,: Innovation in the U. S. Navy's Silent Cold War Struggles with Soviet Submarines. Massachusetts Institute of Technology Security Studies Program, 2000