



MCAS Ewa, Hawaii

Ewa is pronounce "Eva," with a short "e" and a Latin "a" and connotes imperfection in the Hawaiian language. The name was applied to a level coral coastal wasteland west of Honolulu. In the local Oahu vernacular, the word indicates the direction west from Honolulu. One could read in the Honolulu newspaper prior to World War II that a motorist was "driving ewa" when he lost control of his automobile and collided with a palm tree. An American missionary family was sent to Ewa in 1841. The area is one of the driest locations on Oahu. In 1879, an artesian well made irrigation and cultivation possible. The Oahu Sugar Company, later the Ewa Plantation, was chartered by King Kalakaua in 1890 becoming one of the most successful sugar plantations in the islands.

As agriculture marched towards the sea, it met less and less success. The area that would eventually become a Marine Corps air station became an overgrown jungle of algaroba trees, nicknamed kiawe by the Hawaiians, and razor-edged sisal plants from a failed hemp plantation. In 1925, the Navy leased 150 acres and erected a mooring mast for the airship USS *Shenandoah*. Unfortunately, the *Shenandoah* was destroyed in Ohio the same year and the mooring mast became a local landmark. In 1935, the Navy planned to send the USS *Macon* to Hawaii. The Federal Emergency Relief Administration began a project to lower the mast and build quarters for the airship's crew. When the *Macon* crashed off Point Sur, California on February 12, 1935, the project was modified with the completion of a 1,500 x 150-ft. outlying field. For the next six years, the Ewa Mooring Mast Field, occasionally used by Naval aircraft from Ford Island, was manned and maintained by a Navy Chief Petty Officer who lived with his family in a house at the field.

In September 1940, the Navy purchased 3,500 acres

around the mooring mast field for a Marine Corps air station. On January 21, 1941, the Second Marine Aircraft Group, under the command of LCol. Lewie G. Merritt, sailed from San Diego to Hawaii on the aircraft carriers USS *Enterprise* and USS *Lexington*. Disembarkation commenced on January 21 with most of the group temporarily billeted at the Marine Barracks Pearl Harbor. The aircraft remained at Ford Island as a construction detail went to Ewa to build the base. A tent city was quickly established and the field improved to the point that on February 3, the aircraft of VMF-2, VMB-2, and VMJ-2 were flown aboard from Ford Island. A temporary control tower was set up in the crow's nest of the old mooring mast. In the early morning of February 13, radio equipment shorted setting the mooring mast on fire. Sentries alerted the base with three pistol shots and the fire was quickly extinguished with the loss of only one radio set.

Work continued to enlarge the field. Men attacked the sisal with machetes as corpsmen gave aid for cut hands, arms, and faces. Extensive blasting revealed subterranean volcanic caverns some as large as railroad cars. Besides the sisal cuts, the men had to endure mosquitoes, clouds of coral dust, and soot from the burning of nearby sugar cane fields. The area was also infested with wasps known as mud daubers that took to building mud nests in the Marine's rifle barrels. Wooden plugs, used to cork the rifle barrels, became standard equipment. Daubers also took a fancy to the vent lines of the aircraft. This was discovered during a dive of a scouting plane, when the flotation gear inflated, affecting the control of the aircraft. The pilot managed to land the aircraft successfully. Further inspection revealed five other aircraft had vent lines similarly sealed. Beginning on March 1, an inspection and parade was held on the first Saturday of the month. Admiral William "Bull" Halsey attended the first of these

ceremonies for the dedication of the field. Another early visitor was Undersecretary of the Navy James Forrestal who discussed the advisability of dismantling the old mooring mast.

It was still peacetime and not all work and no play. The work and living conditions at Ewa were so arduous that half the command was given liberty every other day. The Oahu Railway ran busses to Honolulu for a fare of 27 cents. Periodic laundry runs were also provided to the Marine Barracks at the Pearl Harbor Naval Base. A portable boxing ring was set up and a series of smokers held. The boxing ring also served as the pulpit for Sunday church services. American capitalistic ingenuity is sometimes a wondrous thing. In spite of the primitive conditions of Ewa, the local Coca-Cola bottler strategically placed Coke dispensers around the base. Unfortunately, bottles were being lost at the rate of 1,000 per month, at a cost of 2 cents per bottle to the Base Exchange. Lectures and shows also entertained the base. The men particularly enjoyed an inspiring musical recital by a hula dancer troupe of the Honolulu Girl's Glee Club.

Meanwhile, flight operations took place from the outset of the arrival of the Group's aircraft on February 3. The first flights consisted of familiarization hops to acquaint the pilots with the islands and the local flight rules. Ewa's own flight rules were published on February 27 with a diagram of taxi, takeoff, landing, and traffic pattern procedures. Group Transportation managed to acquire a crane tractor, that was put to good use on April 11, when an F4F made a forced landing near the airfield. The tractor cut a path through the sisal-tangled terrain, picked up the aircraft, and deposited it back on the mat in the space of one morning. This technique was used many times in the next few years to retrieve downed aircraft from nearby cane and sisal

fields. Ewa's first fatal accident occurred on the night of April 14, when 2Lt. Richard Empie of Jacksonville, Florida was killed in the crash of his SBD-1. On April 21 and 22, VMF-2 and VMB-2 made a total of 215 carrier landings on the USS *Lexington* without any incidents.

To comply with new Navy regulations, the application of non-specular grey-green war paint to the Group's silver colored aircraft began in April. This task, which would take many months, was quite tedious due to the dust and lack of adequate facilities. The Group's scouting squadron, VMS-2, arrived at Ewa on May 13, with 18 new Vought SB2U-3 Vindicators. The poor performing Vindicators were derisively referred to as "Wind Indicators." The carburetors of the Vindicators did not take well to the dusty and cane soot environment at Ewa. As a result, the squadron was earthbound much of the time. On June 24, three pilots of VMF-2 were killed when their formation flew into the side of Haliakala Mountain on Maui. During June, a Link Training officer was detailed due to the arrival of the synthetic flight trainer. At the end of June, the Group's strength stood at 78 officers, 6 warrant officers, and 722 enlisted men.

On July 26, VMB-2 and a Navy bombing squadron from Ford Island participated in an exercise with the Army. The two squadrons first bombed the two-battalion landing force at Kahuku Point, the northernmost tip of Oahu. The squadrons then proceeded to attack Pearl Harbor and Hickam Field where air raid defenses were being practiced. Then the two squadrons landed at Ewa to await further orders for the second phase of the exercise. Five methods of communication were being tested. The order to attack the landing force arrived by teletype at 1048, by radio at 1050, by telephone at 1051, by courier plane at 1115, and by motorcycle dispatch at 1228. After receiving the first order, the squadrons took off attacking the landing force for the second time. The

Army's LGen. Short was so pleased, he sent a letter to Adm. Kimmel praising the Marine and Navy fliers for the excellent interservice cooperation and efficient communications. Those communications would be put to the test a little over four months later and would fail miserably.

While the verbal leis were being bestowed, the Second Marine Aircraft Group was redesignated Marine Air Group 21, and attached to the newly created Second Marine Air Wing. Likewise, VMF-2 was redesignated VMF-211, VMB-2 became VMSB-232, and VMS-2 became VMSB-231. The Group's flight operations continued with VMSB-231 and VMSB-232 dropping practice bombs on targets at Point Kakuahu and the target ship USS *Utah* anchored at Pearl Harbor. VMSB-231 dropped red bombs and VMSB-232 yellow ones. Live bombs were dropped on target sleds towed by surface craft. Spirited arguments arose between proponents of various methods of bombing. VMF-211 practiced aerial dogfights against Army and Navy fighters as well as sharpening their gunnery skills strafing ground targets and on aircraft towed sleeves.

In August, a fleet of construction equipment and gangs of civilian workers invaded Ewa. The Navy had let a contract for a 500-ft. extension of the east-west runway, a 300 x 1,000-ft. warm-up apron, a hangar, a 2,000-ft. spur off of the Oahu Railway, underground fuel storage, road paving, and recreational facilities including a swimming pool. Although the hangar was being used for the third time, it was reportedly still in good condition. Originally erected at the Army's Wheeler Field, the hangar was used during the Dole transpacific race of 1927. The hangar was later disassembled and rebuilt at Ford Island before erected at Ewa. The Marines had adopted an "Out-of-the-Tents-by-Thanksgiving" goal. The obtaining of drinking water from the Ewa Plantation had been discontinued with the completion of a new drilled well; however, hot water was

still unavailable. By the end of October, 700 enlisted men moved into newly completed barracks. On November 18, a change of command occurred when LCol. Claude "Sheriff" Larkin relieved LCol. Merritt. One of Larkin's first acts was to order a detachment of VMF-211, consisting of 100 enlisted men (including an enlisted detachment of VMSB-232), 12 pilots, and 12 F4F Wildcats to Wake Island. On November 29, the officers, the last to leave the tents, moved into the newly completed BOQ. Hot water was finally installed into all living spaces. During the first few days of December, a detachment of VMSB-231 with 18 SB2Us embarked on the USS *Lexington* for deployment to Midway. A notice went out for officers wishing to attend the New Year's Dance at the Ewa Social Club to leave a \$4 deposit with the adjutant before December 10. The dance was not held that year and the \$4 refunded.

At 0755 on December 7, 1941, the men of Ewa heard a large number of aircraft and observed several formations flying down the beach from Barbers Pt. toward Pearl Harbor. The second formation of single-seat fighters wheeled to the right and attacked Ewa. Reactions varied among the men. Some immediately grasped the situation and reacted accordingly. Others were in denial and assumed the aircraft were Army or Navy aircraft on an exercise – even after the bullets started flying and the red circles were seen on the aircraft. Nervous tension affected stomachs, regardless of rank, and several lost Sunday's breakfast. The first attack lasted approximately 20 to 25 minutes – no one knows for sure. The Japanese concentrated their early fire on the tactical aircraft dispersed around the field. After 10 or 15 minutes all of the tactical aircraft had been shot up or set on fire. The Japanese then turned their attention to the utility aircraft and other targets of opportunity. The station's ambulance drove to the vicinity of the mooring mast where the pharmacist's mate received a bullet through the calf – later 56 bullet holes were counted in the ambulance. The sta-

tion's fire truck, that had also responded, was abandoned by its crew after all its tires were holed. Civilian vehicles were not spared and the crowded enlisted parking lot was reduced to a junkyard. Although an effective defense was impossible during the first attack, one machine gun managed to get into action and one Japanese plane was seen trailing smoke before the attackers withdrew.

The second attack began around 0835. During the short lull between raids the defense of Ewa was galvanized by the Marines. Weapons and ammunition had been distributed from the ordnance room. Vehicles still in operation were used to block the runways in the event that the Japanese attempted to land troops. Two SBDs that escaped catching fire were dragged off the parking mat and the rear gunner's position in one of the aircraft manned. Several two-seat bombers approached from the direction of Pearl Harbor and were met by a hail of small arms fire. The defense was concentrated in the unfinished swimming pool and during the day was occupied by up to 50 officers and men. The second attackers strafed and dropped 30-lb. bombs while receiving fire from .30 cal. machine guns, rifles, and submarine guns. One aircraft was observed to crash southwest of the airfield. Two Army P-40s joined the fray and shot down two more aircraft.

Following the end of the second raid, six SBD's from the USS *Enterprise*, landed. They were immediately ordered back into the air. Shortly thereafter, a third raid of 15 fixed-gear aircraft arrived. Due to the heavy ground fire and lack of targets, this last attack only lasted a few minutes. By 0915 it was over. All 21 aircraft of MAG 21 on Oahu had been destroyed on the ground with the exception of one aircraft at Ford Island. Two men were killed and eleven wounded. One of the wounded Marines died three days later. Two of the Marines who died, three others, and a Navy pharmacist's mate were recommended for the Navy Cross for the day's action.

MAG 21's VMF-211 detachment on Wake Island was also under attack by the Japanese. Several hours after the attack on Oahu, 36 Japanese Bettys from Kwajalein managed to reach Wake undetected and put eight of VMF-211's Wildcats out of action. Coincidentally, the USS *Saratoga* was at San Diego ready to depart for Wake via Oahu with 18 F2As of VMF-221. Due to the chaotic situation at Pearl Harbor, the *Saratoga* and other reinforcements did not depart for Wake until December 15. On December 22, the relief force, 627 miles east of Wake, was ordered to abandon the mission. Higher ups at Pearl Harbor felt Wake Island was not worth the risk of losing the few remaining Naval assets left in the Pacific – the defenders on Wake Island were left to their fate. The grossly outnumbered Americans on Wake resisted the Japanese for a total of 16 days before the island fell. The remaining Wildcats made a good account of themselves, but were eventually all destroyed. VMF-211's Capt. Henry Elrod was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor after the war, when his exploits during Wake's defense were learned.

Back in Hawaii, the islands were gripped with fear of a Japanese invasion. At Ewa, Marines were busy digging slit trenches and sandbagging anti-aircraft machine gun nests. The station had one flyable aircraft – an R3D-2 of VMJ-252 that had been at Ford Island's Assembly and Repair Department on December 7. Ewa's runways were relatively undamaged by the attack; therefore, on December 8, an Army fighter squadron with 12 aircraft and 183 men transferred to Ewa until the runways at Wheeler Field could be repaired. The USS *Lexington*, at sea on December 7, returned to Hawaii on December 10 without delivering the 18 SB2Us of VMSB-231 to Midway. One week later, 17 SB2Us of VMSB-231, led by a Navy PBY, successfully flew the 1,100 over water miles to Midway – at the time, this flight was acclaimed as the first of its kind for single-engine military aircraft.

One month before, contractors had begun construction on NAS Barbers Pt., adjacent and to the west of Ewa. On December 19, construction crews were pulled off the Barbers Pt. site to enlarge and improve Ewa. Ewa's original 200 acres increased to 894. The two existing runways were extended, one to 5,000 ft., and two other runways added. Additional buildings and other improvements were also begun.

On January 1, 1942, Marine air power on Oahu consisted of five operable aircraft – the remainder of MAG 21's aircraft were at Midway. The arrival of the four squadrons and Carrier Aircraft Service Unit of the *Saratoga*'s air group boosted Ewa's tactical activity in January. The fighter and scouting squadrons of the air group transferred, but the torpedo, bombing squadrons plus the CASU remained at Ewa for three months. During the first half of 1942, Ewa formed the spearhead of the Marine's air effort against Japan. In February, LCol. W. J. Wallace proceeded to Midway and formed MAG 22 out of MAG 21's VMF-221 and VMSB-231. The next month, two additional air groups commissioned at Ewa – MAG 23 and MAG 24. Splitting up of existing units created additional units. With a core of experienced pilots, squadrons were brought to full complement with new replacement pilots from the mainland. This practice, the most expedient way of building up strength, lasted for the first year of the war. Stateside commissioned groups and squadrons did not arrive from the mainland until late 1942. During March, MAG 24's elements became the first Marine units to depart for the South Pacific, when they shipped out to Efate in the New Hebrides to prepare the airstrip at Vila. The next month, 14 F2As of the reorganized VMF-211 were delivered to Palmyra Island by the USS *Lexington*. In May, LCol. Wallace returned from Midway to assume command of MAG 23.

Once the threat of an immediate Japanese invasion ended, Ewa settled down into a dull repetitive rou-

two years, was relieved of command by Col. Ferry Reynolds. Col. Reynolds, as Col. Young before him, had been C.O. of MCAS Parris Island, prior to taking command of Ewa. The same month, two Marine Towing Detachments commissioned with a mission of towing aerial targets for Marine anti-aircraft units – a task previously provided by Navy utility squadrons. Ewa eventually dispatched Marine-towing units to Barking Sands on Kauai, Maui, Midway, and Guam. Primary aircraft used for towing were Martin JM Marauders. In May 1945, the various towing detachments were redesignated as VMJ or Marine Utility Squadrons. Other units formed at this time at Ewa were LFASCU or Landing Force Air Support Control Units. The mission of the LFASCU was to control close air support once aviation units deployed ashore and the battle became primarily a land-based affair. LFASCUs were first used on Okinawa and were planned for use in the invasion of Japan. From November 1944 to February 1945, four LFASCU units were commissioned and trained at Ewa. In December, MAG 44 arrived from Mojave and would remain until the end of the war training aviation squadrons.

By the end of 1944, Ewa had 360 buildings, with ten more under construction. In addition, the Seabee camp had grown to 205 buildings. There were a total of 21,800 sq. yds. of paved runways and aprons, 18 miles of hard-surfaced roads, 15 miles of water mains, 10 miles of electrical distribution lines, and 12 miles of telephone truck lines. Negotiations were under way to acquire 225 additional acres including ocean frontage. In October 1942, the air station transportation equipment consisted of a bicycle assigned to the C.O. By the end of 1944, the transportation department had grown to 584 vehicles that included 313 MCAS vehicles, a 209-vehicle pool for use by tactical units, and 62 pieces of heavy equipment. The station also put into operation a dairy plant that produced 3,000 gallons of ice cream a week and processed 3,200 gallons of milk from

powdered milk. On December 20, 1944, a Navy pilot of VF(N)-90 lost control of his F6F-5N while making a touch-and-go landing and crashed down a line of VMF-213 Corsairs parked nose to tail. The Hellcat and one Corsair were written-off while five other Corsairs had to have one wing replaced. Incredibly, no one was injured.

Just after the first of 1945, Ewa underwent a major change as the first women Marines arrived. Aviation Women's Reserve Squadron 14 went on to perform every conceivable job on the base short of actually flying the aircraft, thereby freeing men for combat duty. In February 1945, VMR-352 arrived at Ewa from Camp Kearney joined the next month by MAG 15 and Headquarters Squadron 15. VMR-353 and HqSq-15, along with VMR-953, became a part of the Transport Air Group flying cargo missions to the Gilberts, Marshalls, Marianas, Carolines, Philippines, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa for the remainder of the war. On February 16, a practice bomb fell from a Barbers Pt. based Corsair and pierced the wing of an R5C, just missing the gas tanks. On May 5, 1945, Col. Jacob F. Plachta relieved Col. Ferry Reynolds as Ewa's C.O. The same month, Marine Observation Group One formed to administer the growing number of Marine observation squadrons in the Pacific. Provisional Marine Carrier Aircraft Service Unit One, with a proposed strength of 16 officers and 549 enlisted men, was created to perform service and maintenance for the Marine escort carrier groups carrying out training from Pearl Harbor. Eventually this unit would support three Marine carrier groups at one time.

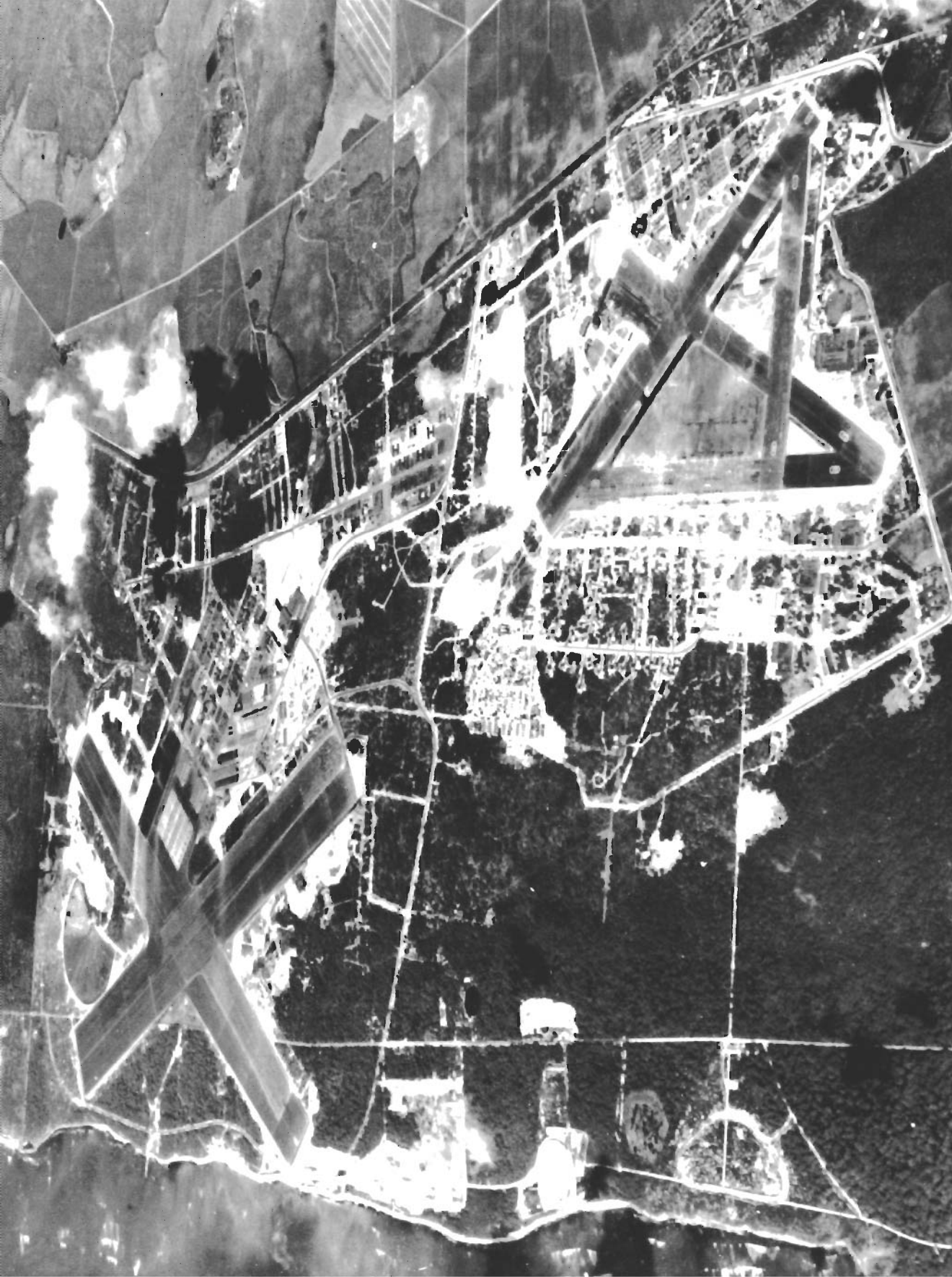
Following the war, MAG 15 and MAG 44 remained at Ewa for a time. Many of the Marine aircraft present throughout the South Pacific, such as the PBJ, were sent to Ewa, their engines removed then scrapped. The Korean War brought a new surge of activity, but also exposed the inadequacy of Ewa, as Marine jet aircraft were unable to use the station's

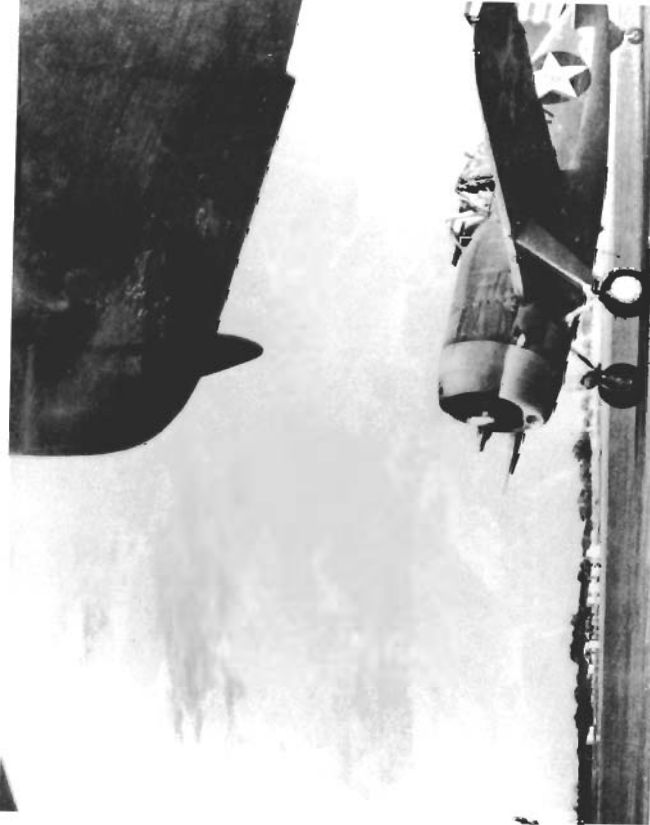
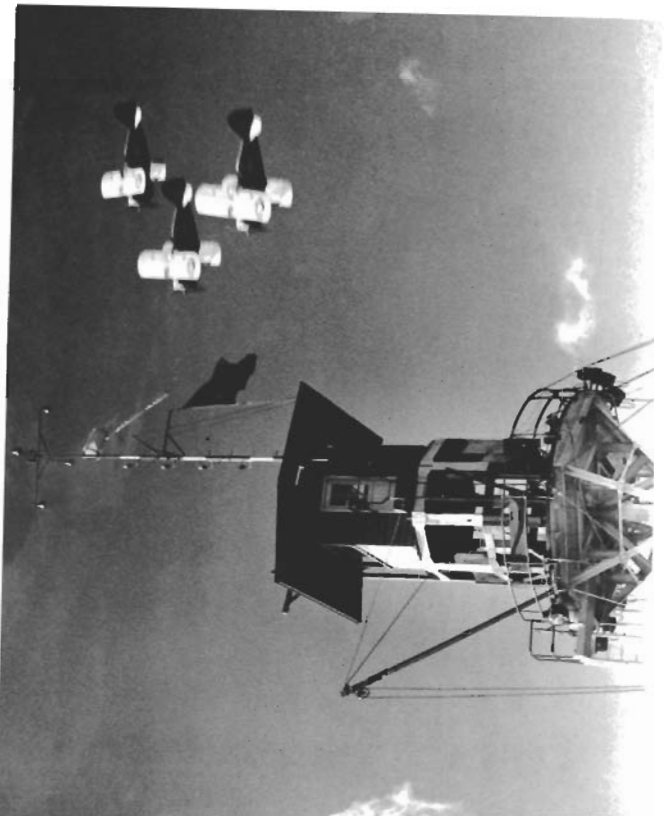
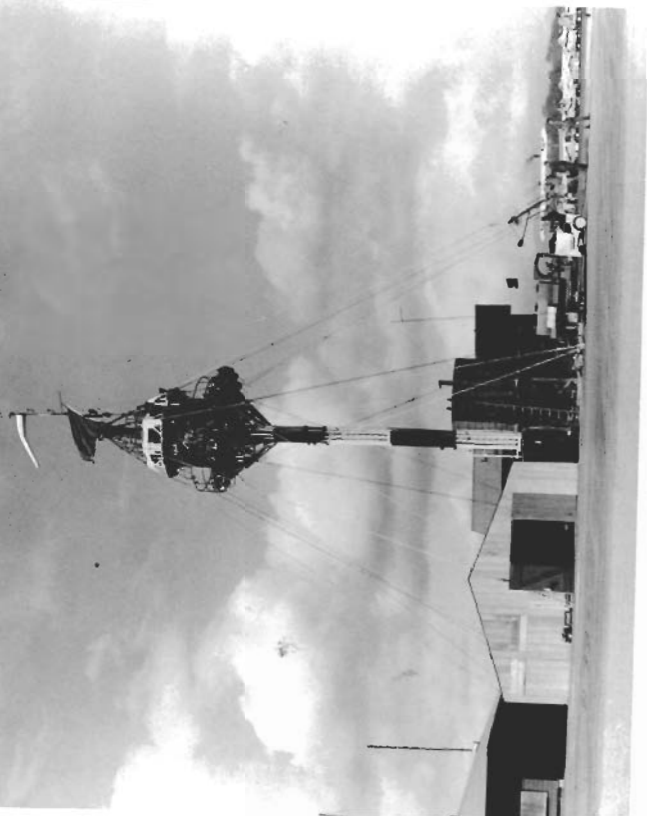
short runways. The close proximity of Barbers Pt. ruled out any expansion of Ewa in the jet age. As a result, Marine aviation on Hawaii moved to the former NAS at Kaneohe Bay commissioning an MCAS there on January 15, 1952. Ewa officially closed on June 18, 1952 and its property absorbed into NAS Barbers Pt. Ewa's buildings eventually all came down and the land used mostly as a recreational area for Barbers Pt. A portion of Barbers Pt.'s golf course was located on the property and some of the former aircraft revetments became horse corrals. Ewa's roads are still in existence. The runways and ramp were still in evidence in the late 1990's but overgrown. NAS Barbers Pt. closed in 1999 as Navy flying operations moved to Kaneohe Bay. The Barbers Pt. airfield will become a reliever airport for Honolulu International. The Navy will retain the base housing. The remainder of the base, including the former Ewa, will be decided to the state and local governments for use as they see fit.

If Quantico is the "Crossroads of the Marine Corp," then surely Ewa was the "Crossroads of the Pacific" for Marine aviation. During the course of the war, most of the Marine aviation units serving in the South Pacific, approximately 70 commands and squadrons, passed through Ewa. In addition, Ewa's units were directly involved in the actions at Midway as well as Wake Island. Ewa's role in Marine aviation during WW II will forever be remembered in the Corps.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Looking west, this photograph shows the close proximity of Ewa, in the foreground, to NAS Barbers Point, in the background. When Ewa closed, its property was absorbed by Barbers Pt.

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ABOVE: Brewster F3A Buffalo taxis out. After the aircraft's dismal performance at Midway against Japanese Zero, the Marines declared it unfit for combat.
USMC 1942

ABOVE LEFT: The mooring mast was erected in 1925 for the dirigible, USS Shenandoah, destroyed in a crash the same year. The mast was lowered in 1935 for the USS Macon, but that ship was also lost. No dirigible or blimp ever moored at Ewa.
USMC 1942

LEFT: When the **MAG 2** first arrived at Ewa in 1941, a temporary tower was set up on top of the mooring mast. The mast was finally removed in September 1942 upon completion of a new control tower. Aircraft in background are Grumman F3F.
USMC 1942