

Field Guide to Coronado History:

Coronado's Seaplane Legacy

By Bruce Linder



Navy PB2Y "Coronado" flying boat over Camp Pendleton 1944

For over a hundred years ordinary Coronadans have gazed up into the blue with eyes drawn skyward attracted by the deep drone of enormous engines.

More often than not, they spied big, lumbering, and yet graceful airplanes of a unique species –never knowing, perhaps, that these ships of the sky were special aviation icons and threads to both a past and present Coronado. These were Coronado's seaplanes.

Seaplanes, flying boats, floatplanes, hydroplanes, birdies. On any given day, between the 1920s, and the 1940s, hundreds of these craft dotted the skies and waters around Coronado. They were ubiquitous,

as much a part of Coronado as ferries, and everyone in Coronado during this era remembers something about them.

Seaplanes were invented right here in Coronado. In fact, the exact spot of the world's first seaplane flight sits today near the 4th green of North Island's Sea n' Air Golf Course – originally part of the inlet called Spanish Bight. For quite a long time, Coronado was the world's center of seaplanes. Really!

It all began during January 1911 with inventor and entrepreneur Glenn Curtiss at the controls. Aircraft of his design had been the first to take off and land aboard Navy ships but those aircraft had wheels. Now, Curtiss was after a Navy contract for a truly unique kind of airplane, one that would operate directly from the sea.

During his time in Coronado working on new aircraft designs, Glenn Curtiss built a home at the corner of Alameda Boulevard and 3rd Street – in part, so that he could look directly across Spanish Bight to his hangars and workshops. That house still stands and won the 2014 GEM Award in Coronado for inspired home renovation.

In the days before government R&D or venture capitalists you had to do everything yourself and Curtiss used his time in Coronado to perfect his concept until he finally captured the Navy's interest. The Navy's first aviation squadron was formed, and Curtiss began training the Navy's first aviators. He called his flyer a "hydroaeroplane."

By World War I, North Island had become a center of naval pilot training, especially in advanced flying boats. All four of the Navy's first hangars on North Island were built with ramps where planes could easily move to and from the bay. It wasn't long before the commander of all aircraft for the Navy's Battle Fleet transferred his staff to Coronado and by 1926 over half of naval air operations in San Diego were flown by aircraft from seaplane hangars.

In 1935, the Consolidated Aircraft Company, the largest maker of seaplanes in the United States, moved their operations to San Diego. Their Lindbergh Field plant started rolling out hundreds of PBY Catalina flying boats that rose to prominence as the Navy's "eyes of the fleet." During World War II, Consolidated plants produced over

2,000 of these planes, and the ramps at North Island were almost always jam-packed with Catalina flying boats.

It surprised no one that Consolidated looked to Coronado when they named the Catalina's follow-on aircraft design, the four-engine PB2Y "Coronado" flying boat. Over 200 Coronados were built by Consolidated in San Diego during World War II for long-range reconnaissance, bombing, and transport.

If you were a kid in Coronado during the mid-1930's you could view seaplanes taking off or landing from giant seaplane "runways" in the bay around Coronado. One "runway" sat between today's Harbor Island and Shelter Island and two others were easily visible from the Silver Strand in South Bay. Each landing area was marked by buoys with scary signs to warn any interlopers of the impending arrival of huge seaplanes that could appear out of nowhere with little hope that a sleepyheaded sailboat could maneuver out of the way.

All the way up until the mid-1960's, enormous Navy P-5M Marlins would taxi many times a day from North Island to South Bay right along the First Street shore, their loud powerful engines flinging spray everywhere.

Today, Navy seaplanes have gone the way of battleships and corvettes but Coronado's seaplane legacy still lives. Small planes with giant



pontoons from San Diego Seaplanes fly low over the city on various tours or lie anchored along Coronado's waterfront. But as you watch these seaplanes take off from San Diego Bay, don't just think of their nimble motions and classic designs, think about Those Times in Coronado and a hundred years of city history.

Navy P5M seaplane over Coronado circa 1960