

## Field Guide to Coronado History: Dodged a Bullet

By Bruce Linder



*Distinctive P5M Marlin seaplane over the Del, late 1950s*

It was an isolated little story, not much too it – but a story of the past that never came to fruition – much to the relief of the present and the future.

It is the story of Pacific-wide strategy, of giant airplanes, and of Coronado's "seadrome."

By the end of World War II, Coronado had risen to become a worldwide center for seaplanes. Glenn Curtiss had flown the world's first seaplane from Spanish Bight in 1911, thousands of Navy pilots learned to fly seaplanes here, and several thousand PBY Catalina flying boats had crammed the ramps and hangars at North Island. Huge, majestic, long-range seaplanes could be seen everywhere.

After the war, the cornerstone of U. S. naval strategy in the Pacific involved Soviet containment and Pacific-wide reach. Beyond aircraft carriers and fleet deployments, the Navy had yet another layer of strategy – seaplanes.

When it came to seaplanes, 75 percent of the world's surface could be available as runways. Seaplanes could operate from anywhere in the Pacific: any island, any strait, any remote corner from the South Seas to the Aleutians. They could patrol, transport, bomb, mine, provide early warning, perform anti-submarine operations – even drop A-bombs.

Seaplanes were important and the trends were up. Our Navy operated the world's largest seaplane fleet during the 1950s and was constantly developing modern variants; including big, jet-powered patrol planes and small, jet-powered seaplane fighters.

In the Navy's eyes, Coronado was absolutely perfect for seaplanes: a great heritage, excellent facilities, and protected bay waters for runways. There were two sets of runways in San Diego Bay, one in the main shipping channel between North Island and Shelter Island and others in the open waters of the South Bay.

Beginning in 1953, the Navy started looking to move their North Island seaplanes to a new base in the South Bay.

The Navy's proposed plan would put seaplane squadrons right next to the runways (eliminated the need for taxiing all the way down the bay for takeoff and landing), and could provide a bigger base for further expansion. The Navy called the South Bay “the most suitable location for seaplane operations on the entire West Coast.”

Few people in Coronado even noticed. Who cared about the South Bay? Most called the southern Silver Strand “dirty.” That’s near the old Hog Ranch, right? The Coronado city dump?

A year later in 1954, the Navy published their preliminary plans for what they called a “seadrome.”

Oops, Coronado suddenly began to notice that something was up. The Navy was not just going to invade the “dirty” South Bay; they were planning on building an enormous new base.

To everyone’s shock, control towers, ramps, seaplane parking, huge hangars, roads, tarmacs, security gates, dredging, and tons and tons and tons of cement would now dominate the quiet beauty of the Silver Strand.

And the noise ... egads, squadrons of seaplanes with some of the largest, loudest engines in the business! Just ask the residents of First Street about the noise of echelons of giant seaplanes taxiing by their front windows to and from South Bay runways.

Coronado had just finished extending its city limits down the Strand to its current border with Imperial Beach and had general plans for recreation and golf as well as a thought for a residential development at what was referred to as Rancho Carrillo and now called Coronado Cays.

If the Navy’s general plans didn’t spark outrage, the sudden arrival of the entire report horrified anyone who cared about the future vision of Coronado.

Among the five potential sites, the “most highly preferred” was that centered on the Cays, with the second preferred site sitting right next to the State Park at the current site of Navy Housing.

Some had been suspicious of the Navy’s intents, now many more rose in opposition.

All of this, of course, never came to be ... and in that we are thankful today.

If seaplanes had prevailed, any hope for the Cays would have been dashed, no Loews Coronado Bay Resort would ever have been attracted to the site, the State Park might have left, and there would have been little talk of unblemished beaches, a clean bay, a stunning marina, or a sparkling residential enclave.

Even if the Navy had come for a bit and then left, any Cays development would have been throttled by massive amounts of concrete.

And who is to say that the Navy would have ever left?