

Wings on the Grounds

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Teeb Thomas, on the left in the middle row, and his classmates.

Photo provided

Thomas attended U.C. Berkeley on the G.I. Bill, and became an industrial engineer. He and wife Rudi settled in Orinda in 1949 because Thomas knew and liked the area from his time at St. Mary's. They put four sons through local schools. Thomas says he owned and flew private planes, including a Piper super cub and a Cessna 172, into his 80's. Although he finally gave up the pilot's seat, he still flies --as a passenger --with his pilot son. He donated his flight suit to the Alameda Naval Air Museum.

Thomas helped organize and attended a 1995 reunion for preflight school cadets, held at St. Mary's College. The cadre of former cadets is aging; many have filed their final flight plan. Those who remain are close to their 90th birthdays. But in spite of that, and the urgency of a nation then at war, Thomas says his St. Mary's College days were "one of the better times in my life."

From Private College to Government Venue: St. Mary's Becomes a 1940's Wartime Aviation School



The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor left the U.S. military short of fighter pilots. In response, the Navy set up pre-flight training schools across the country. One of those was at St. Mary's College.

The Navy ran its school from 1942 to 1946.

A future U.S. President (Gerald Ford) coached football on campus in 1945.

1427 men with ties to St. Mary's College served in the military during WW II;

21 are known to have died in uniform.

On February 27, 1942 a telegram was sent to college President Brother Austin:

"St. Mary's College has been selected by the Navy Department as one of the four locations [across the U.S.] for pre-flight training. Your patriotic cooperation in this vital program is appreciated." Signed: Frank Knox, Secretary of the Navy

To house and feed its 2,000 cadets, the Navy:

- Built temporary barracks, a field house (with an indoor swimming pool) and a rifle range.
- Leveled out the land from the Chapel to St. Mary's Road to make athletic fields, some of which are still in use today.
- Required East Bay Municipal Utility District (EBMUD) to construct a water pipeline to the campus: "to provide adequate water supply, both for drinking purposes and for fire protection." (Adm. L.E. Denfield, May 12, 1942).

The hills surrounding St. Mary's Moraga campus made a marvelous natural amphitheater, recalls former Marine Corps pilot Chuck Temple of Florence, Oregon. "The bugler would play taps from the [chapel] tower, once slowly, then he'd 'jazz it up,' and it would echo all around the hills!"

C. Dausman

Sources:

Pipe Dream Fulfilled: How the Navy helped bring water to St. Mary's
John Grennan, author

The History of U.S. Navy Pre-Flight School, St. Mary's California, U.S. Navy, 1946

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