

## Historical Backgrounder Moffett Field

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In the late 1920s, the Navy developed plans to build an airship base on the West Coast similar to Lakehurst. Some 94 communities vied for the base, with the Navy choosing Sunnyvale at the southern end of San Francisco Bay. Even though the country was in the depths of the depression, the community managed to raise \$476,000 to purchase 1000 acres for the Navy. When Sunnyvale received official news of the Navy's acceptance, schools closed for a day and a parade was held. On February 20, 1931, President Hoover signed a bill authorizing the Navy to accept title to the land, which was sold to the military for one dollar.

Naval Air Station Sunnyvale was built to house the largest aircraft of its day - - the USS *Macon*, a 785 foot-long dirigible. To house it, the Navy built the massive Hangar 1, one of the best-known landmarks in the Bay Area. The *Macon* was intended to provide long-range reconnaissance for the Pacific Fleet. Construction began in October -- half the \$5 million authorized was allocated for construction of Hangar 1. Meanwhile on April 4, 1933, the USS *Akron* crashed off Barnegat Light, N.J. with the loss of 74 lives - including RADM William A. Moffett, Chief of the Navy's Bureau of Aeronautics. Two months later, the station's airfield name was changed to Moffett Field in honor of the late RADM. On October 15, 1933 the USS *Macon* arrived at her new home after a 70-hour flight from Lakehurst. The *Macon* operated from Moffett until it crashed in a storm on February 12, 1935, off Point Sur.

In September 1935, the Navy traded Moffett Field to the Army in exchange for three other airfields. Moffett eventually became headquarters of the Army's Western Flying Training Command. During this time, the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA) established what would eventually become NASA Ames Research Center on 62 acres adjacent to the Naval Air Station. Moffett Field became a major center for the development and testing of new aviation and flight-related technology.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the military decided it needed aircraft to patrol the Pacific for submarines and mines. Washington ordered the Army to vacate the base, and return it to the Navy, which immediately restarted their lighter-than-air (LTA) command with smaller blimps only 246 feet in length.

Two ex Army airships, TC-13 and TC-14, had been given to the Navy when the Army abandoned its LTA program in 1937. In January 1942, the deflated blimps, in storage at Lakehurst, were shipped by rail to Moffett and inflated. On February 4, 1942, ZP-32 conducted its first flight. During March and April, Moffett added three L-ships appropriated from Goodyear's advertising fleet. Goodyear then began a program to ship new deflated blimps from Akron, Ohio to Moffett for final assembly and inflation. The Navy placed the first airship completed by this program, K-20, in service on October 31.

Even Hangar 1 was insufficient to house all the activity around the revitalized lighter-than-air reconnaissance project. In 1942, two more huge hangars were constructed in record time, primarily out of wood and concrete because of war-time shortages of steel.

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Meanwhile, in October 1942, the first cadets arrived for blimp flight training. Prospective blimp pilots were recruited directly from pre-flight schools -- some were former LTA enlisted men. Initially, cadets trained at Moffett as ground crew men to learn blimp-handling procedures. A few flights in hydrogen-filled free balloons followed before training in L-ships began. After completing primary training, the cadets traveled to Lakehurst for advanced training in K-ships.

Moffett was the center for West Coast LTA operations and headquarters for the Commander, Fleet Airships Pacific -- alongside two additional West Coast LTA stations in Santa Ana, California, and Tillamook, Oregon.

By the beginning of 1944, the Navy began to scale down its LTA operations -- especially on the West Coast where Japanese submarines had never become a serious threat. In March 1944, primary blimp flight training ended. Goodyear's assembly program at Moffett ended after delivering a total of 39 L, G, and K-ships.

As the year continued, Moffett was designated a joint LTA/HTA (heavier-than-air) station, with several VPB squadrons transferred to, and established there. The Antisubmarine Warfare Training Unit/ Moffett formed in 1945, with 13 aircraft. A \$2.5 million contract then began to strengthen the taxiways. At that time, Moffett had a 7000-ft. runway that was part of a 1.14 million sq. yd. asphalt mat with eight mooring circles. Barracks existed for 290 officers and 2,500 enlisted men.

In June 1945, the first M-ship, the largest blimp in Naval service, arrived.

As many as 20 blimps at a time were on duty at the base during the war years, and Moffett Field had an excellent record of ship and mine detection. But as jet airplanes were developed and began to take over the functions of the blimps, the lighter-than-air program went into decline. In 1947, the last blimp at Moffett Field was deflated. The era of lighter-than-air ships was over.

Following the war, Moffett became the West Coast center for NATS. The Navy then based carrier squadrons at Moffett and, in 1953, designated the station the Navy's first Master Jet Base. In 1958, Congress created NASA with the National Aeronautics and Space Act. The Ames Aeronautical Laboratory was renamed Ames Research Center and became a NASA field center. Over the years, Ames Research Center used its laboratories and wind tunnels to test dozens of propulsion systems and airplane designs. As the coalition of Bay Area counties predicted when it lobbied for the creation of Moffett Field in the late 1920's, the base's research program catalyzed the development of numerous private technology and aerospace corporations, among them Hiller Aircraft Corporation and Lockheed Martin.

In 1962 the Navy was relocating Moffett's jet squadrons to NAS Miramar and to a new air station at Lemoore, and there was much speculation as to the future of Moffett Field. Then came the announcement that Moffett was selected as the site of introduction on the west coast for the Navy's newest, fastest and most effective submarine hunter-killer aircraft, the P-3 Orion. Moffett Field then returned to its original mission of long-range reconnaissance and anti-submarine patrols, covering approximately 93 million square miles of the Pacific Ocean, stretching from the coast of Alaska to Hawaii.

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Yet, continued urban growth doomed jet operations at Moffett. As a result of the 1991 Base Realignment and Closure Commission's decision, NAS Moffett closed on July 1, 1994, becoming the Moffett Federal Airfield - - still home to the Air National Guard's 129<sup>th</sup> Rescue Group and to two Navy Reserve squadrons.

In July 1994, NASA, which owns the adjacent Ames Research Center, assumed control of Moffett Federal Airfield. Supervision of Moffett's two runways, three aircraft hangars, and 3.5 million square feet of facilities was turned over to NASA Ames Research Center. As the new federal custodian, NASA Ames now operates Moffett as a shared federal facility.

NASA's goal is to develop portions of Moffett Field into the NASA Research Park (NRP), a 213-acre world-class research and development campus for partners from academia, industry and non-profit corporations with shared goals in support of NASA's mission.

Aligning perfectly with both NASA's future direction, and the historic beginnings of Moffett Field, in 2007, Airship Ventures approached NASA with a historic reuse option for Hanger 2 and Building 20 -- to serve as home base for America's first commercial Zeppelin airship flight operation. The airship's arrival in October, 2008, will mark the first time in more than 70 years that a Zeppelin has flown in the skies over the United States.

As with the first blimps at Moffett, the surrounding communities of Sunnyvale and Mountain View are once again supporting airship flight operations at Moffett Field – encouraging the reuse of the historic hanger building and excited for the return of legendary lighter-than-air giants to the skies above their community.

Located in Santa Clara County, near the southern tip of San Francisco Bay, Moffett Federal Airfield encompasses approximately 2,263 acres, and has two fully instrumented parallel runways. There are four aircraft maintenance hangars and 472,300 square yards of aircraft parking apron. The airfield is bordered on the north by salt evaporation ponds adjacent to San Francisco Bay, on the west by Stevens Creek and NASA's Ames Research Facility, on the south by Highway 101, and on the east by the Lockheed Aerospace Center. Ames occupies about 430 acres of land, and serves as host to a number of other federal, civilian, and military resident agencies on the adjoining 1,500-acre former naval air station.

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