

Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, CA

Marine Corps Installations Excellence Award 2024 Ground Installation of the Year

Of all the Marine Corps bases throughout the world, Camp Pendleton has a most intriguing past filled with historical charm and vibrancy. Spanish explorers, colorful politicians, herds of thundering cattle, skillful vaqueros and tough Marines have all contributed to the history of this land.

In 1769, Capt. Gaspar de Portola, a Spaniard, led an expeditionary force northward from Baja, or lower California, seeking to find a ship-worthy port. On July 20 of that same year, the expedition arrived at a location now known as Camp Pendleton, the land was baptized in the name of Santa Margarita as it was her holy day.

During the next 30 years, 21 Franciscan missions were established in California. The most productive was Mission San Luis Rey, just south of present-day Camp Pendleton with control over the Santa Margarita area.

In 1821, following Mexico's independence from Spain, the Californios became the new ruling class of California; many were first generation descendants of the Portola expedition. The Mexican governor award land grants and ranchos to prominent businessmen, officials and military leaders. In 1841, brothers Pio and Andres Pico became the first private owners of Rancho Santa Margarita. More land was later added to the grant, changing the name to Rancho Margartia y Las Flores which remained until the Marine Corps acquired it in 1942.

In 1863, John Forster gained the deed to the ranch from his brother-in-law Pio Pico. During Forster's tenure, the ranch house was expanded and developed into a thriving cattle industry.

After a string of droughts and a fence law that forced Forster to construct fencing around his extensive rancho lands, the rancho was purchased and managed by partners James Flood and Richard O'Neill. Under the guidance of O'Neill's son, Jerome, the ranch began to net a profit of nearly half a million dollars annually, and the house was modernized and furnished.

Although both the Army and the Marine Corps were looking for a large training base, it was announced April of 1942 that the rancho was about to be transformed into the largest Marine Corps base in the country. The Marine Corps paid \$4,239,062 for the rancho.



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Expansion of all U.S. armed forces was authorized by President Franklin D. Roosevelt's proclamation for an unlimited national emergency on May 27, 1941, and an immediate need for additional amphibious force training facilities led to the construction of Camp Pendleton.

After five months of construction, the first troops to occupy the new Base were the 9th Marine Regiment with the 1st Battalion, 12th Marines, who marched from Camp Elliot in San Diego to Camp Pendleton. President Franklin D. Roosevelt dedicated the Base on Sept 25, 1942, in honor of World War I Major General Joseph H. Pendleton who had long advocated the establishment of a West Coast training base.

The first women Marine reservists arrived in 1943 to help keep Base administration running smoothly. The O'Neill's blacksmith shop became the Ranch House Chapel and opened primarily for their use.

By October 1944, Camp Pendleton was declared a "permanent installation" and by 1946, became the home of the 1st Marine Division.

Camp Pendleton trained the country's fighting force for the Korean and Vietnam Wars, with approximately 200,000 Marines passing through the Base on their way to the Far East.

The Corps broadened its capabilities during the 1980's from "amphibious" to "expeditionary" by combining infantry armor, supply and air power. Troops and equipment could now be deployed halfway around the world in only days as part of a self-sustaining air-ground team. This successful use of military power has been demonstrated through the Marine Corps operations in Grenada, Panama, the Persian Gulf, Somalia, Bosnia, Haiti, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Camp Pendleton continued to grow with renovations, replacing its original tent camps with more than 2,600 buildings and 500 miles of roads.

Efforts today preserve the rich heritage of Camp Pendleton's founders and the more than 230 years of Marine Corps history. Streets and sites have been named in honor of military war heroes and battles, the locations originally christened by Spanish explorers and missionaries continue that heritage and the ranch's cattle brand has become Camp Pendleton's logo. The original Santa Margarita Ranch House has been declared a National Historic Site where the Base hosts tours to share its history.

