

Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, NC

Marine Corps Installations Excellence Award 2024 Air Station of the Year

It is said that the name “Cherry Point” comes from a Neuse River promontory once called Cherry Point to the east of Hancock Creek. A tiny settlement of fishermen and hunters sprung up in the area in the early 19th Century under the name of Cherry Point Landing, where the name was eventually shortened when a post office opened there in 1890. The post office was closed in 1935, but the community’s small cemetery still exists today.

Congress authorized Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point on July 9, 1941, with an initial appropriation of \$14,990,000 for construction and clearing of an 8,000-acre tract of swamps, farms, and timberland.

Interestingly, early records indicate that Cherry Point’s location was selected from a “sunshine map” as one of the three areas in the United States having the greatest amount of annual sunshine – “an important factor in an air base.” Two bad features that detracted from its desirability were, first, its exposure to hurricanes, and second, the presence of malarial mosquitoes due to the swamps. Fortunately, sunshine won the day.

On August 18, 1941, the organization known as “Air Facilities under Development at Cherry Point, North Carolina” was established in accordance with Major General Commandant Letter 01358/AN-14-mwk, dated August 9, 1941. The initial construction of the air station focused on clearing the site, with extensive drainage and malaria control work.

In September 1941, the designation of the organization was changed to Cunningham Field, Cherry Point, N.C., in honor of the Marine Corps’ first aviator, LtCol. Alfred A. Cunningham. Construction began in November, just 17 days before the attack on Pearl Harbor. The December attack on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese lent urgency to the completion of the complex, located in Craven County between New Bern and Morehead City.

On December 1, 1941, the designation of Cunningham Field was changed to U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, N.C. It was commissioned as such on May 20, 1942.

Cherry Point’s primary World War II mission was to train units and individual Marines for service in the Pacific theater. The air station also served as a base for anti-submarine operations, with a U.S. Army Air Corps and U.S. Navy unit each being responsible for the sinking of a German U-boat just off the North Carolina coast in 1943.

Cherry Point’s contribution to the Korean War effort was to provide a steady flow of trained aviators and air crewmen as well as maintenance and support personnel as replacements to forward deployed aviation units.



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During the Vietnam War, 2d Marine Aircraft Wing deployed three Cherry Point-based A-6 Intruder squadrons to the Far East and again provided a constant source of replacements for aircrews and enlisted aviation personnel.

In Operation Desert Storm, Cherry Point was a major contributor to the victory in Southwest Asia by supporting the deployment of three AV-8B Harrier squadrons, two A-6E Intruder squadrons, one KC-130 Hercules squadron, one EA-6B Prowler squadron, and headquarters detachments from Marine Aircraft Group 14, Marine Aircraft Group 32, and the 2d MAW.

After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington D.C., Cherry Point provided support to a constant stream of combat units involved in Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan and Operation Iraqi Freedom in Iraq. From 2001 through 2014, 2d MAW units prepared for the War on Terrorism at Cherry Point's bombing ranges and expeditionary landing fields between repeated rotations into Iraq, Afghanistan, Horn of Africa and shipboard with deployed Marine Expeditionary Units, as well as deployments to the Far East under the Unit Deployment Program. The air station not only served as a prime location for training and maintenance of Harrier, Prowler and KC-130 combat aircraft, and training and housing the Marines who operate them and support them on the ground – it also served as the jump-off and return point for thousands of East Coast-based ground combat Marines through the air station's Aerial Port of Embarkation.

Today, Cherry Point remains one of the best all weather jet bases in the world. The air station and its associated support locations occupy approximately 29,000 acres. The heart of Cherry Point is its massive four-point runway system, which is designed to provide multiple approach and departure advantages to all aviators who have the opportunity to fly here. The air station's runways are so long they served as an alternate emergency landing site for NASA during the years that the agency maintained a space shuttle program. Reaching further out from the main air station area is Cherry Point's system of ranges and auxiliary landing fields, which provide unique littoral training opportunities for 2d MAW as well as aviation and naval combatants across all U.S. and some foreign military services. Cherry Point's influence in the region stretches even further with its 2015 expansion of air traffic control services to cover more than 9,000 square miles of airspace for military, civil and commercial air traffic.

More than 53,000 people make up the total Cherry Point-related population, including active duty and retired Marines, the civilian workforce, and their families. Nearly 14,000 Marines, Sailors and civilian employees earn an annual payroll of more than \$1.2 billion. These salaries, in addition to retiree benefits and local expenditures for supplies and capital improvements, come to more than \$2 billion in annual economic impact to the state, adding more significance to Cherry Point's total value to the region, to North Carolina and to the nation.

Future expansion includes an all-new air traffic control center, Fitness center, runway improvements, new main gate and 3 brand new, state of the art hangars to support six F-35 Joint Strike Fighter squadrons. VMFA-542, currently deployed to Norway, is the first operational F-35B squadron on the East Coast. They will be joined shortly by VMFA-251, the first operational F-35C squadron on the East Coast, currently standing up.

Finally, the air station owes much of its success to the warm support its service members and their families receive from the surrounding off-base communities, both in peace and in war. The people of the region have proven, time and again, that Cherry Point Marines and Sailors are fortunate to have them as neighbors.

