

AIRPORT: GILLESPIE FIELD/EARLY DAYS

by Jim Graves

In World War II, the U.S. Marine Corps established a base and airfield on farmland in El Cajon for the training of Marine parachute battalions. It was begun on May 6, 1942, and named in honor of Archibald H. Gillespie, USMC.

In late 1845, Lt. Archibald H. Gillespie had been sent by President James K. Polk to deliver secret orders to Counsel Thomas Larkin and Capt. John C. Fremont in Oregon and California. After this mission was completed, he remained in the latter area and took part in sporadic land and sea military actions as Mexico and the United States moved closer to actual war. These occurred in Los Angeles, San Diego, San Pasqual, and Monterey. In 1854, he was ordered to and reported to Washington, D.C., where he became a breveted major in recognition of his outstanding services.

The area referred to as Gillespie consisted of approximately 700 acres. Living quarters for the trainees and other personnel included two barracks. In addition, there were numerous quonset huts and cinder-block buildings. A mess hall, PX, and administration building were included along with a small garage and a firehouse. Two larger buildings were constructed. One was used as a gymnasium and to drop parachute harnesses from the ceiling; the other as a place for drying, folding, and packing parachutes. Water was supplied to the facility by means of a tall water tower situated on a high hill to the northwest. Overshadowing the entire military complex were three lofty towers of 256 feet which were used to train the men in parachute drops.

This field was the sight of many interesting personal experiences. One of these is related by Orland Huffman, brother of Rex Huffman, a famous police chief of El Cajon. He relates:

I flew out here one time. I used to land at Gillespie Air Field. It was then a Marine Base. I landed there one time; it was, in fact, the day the Japanese surrendered.

I flew a mission from Midland, Texas, to Spokane, Washington and when the war ended, I took off from Spokane to come home to spend the weekend. It probably wasn't legal, but I flew down the coast. The fact is, I think everything was

supposed to be grounded. I flew from Spokane down to San Diego and landed at Gillespie. I was going to spend the weekend with my folks.

Either Sunday or Monday I went back to get my airplane and there was a squadron of Navy Corsairs in there. They had come in from a carrier and landed.

As I looked at my airplane, I saw this Corsair snugged up against my airplane. They (Corsairs) had poor visibility--they had a high front and had to taxi to see. This Navy Ensign didn't see well enough and he taxied into my airplane. His propeller had chopped off two or three cylinders. So when I got there my airplane was out of commission and I was illegally in El Cajon instead of Midland, Texas.

So I called the base and told them what happened. They said, "OK, just stay there and when the Navy gets it fixed, come on home." So I got a week's free vacation at home waiting till the Navy fixed my airplane. They fixed it eventually. About a week later I took off and went back to Midland. No disciplinary action.

Fran Hill recalled that, "At the sight of the planes circling low over El Cajon many of us would head out to North Magnolia to watch the paratroopers jump. There would be silence until they cleared the plane and chutes opened. We could hear the paratroopers laughing and calling to each other as they drifted toward the field."

Fran continued, "El Cajon had a dance hall in the 40's. It was located along El Cajon Blvd. somewhere near Marshall. It was called Johnny's and later became Andy's Dance Hall. There was no shortage of Marines to dance with for the local girls during the war years."

Besides the earlier buildings, facilities at the base eventually included two paved runways (4,200 and 5,400 feet long), taxiways, roads, a sewer system, sewage treatment plant, water system, and an olympic sized swimming pool (Gunther). The County of San Diego took over the operation of the airport in December, 1947, on a lease basis after it was declared surplus. The title was acquired on June 11, 1953, for \$1.00. The area was later annexed to the City of El Cajon in the mid-seventies. Finally, in March, 1980, a photo exhibit honoring Archibald Gillespie was received, and is now displayed in the Administration Building as a fitting reminder to a true Marine!