

This article and photos appeared in *The Weymouth News*, June 18, 2008.

Titled - **Requiem for Demise of Military Presence at NAS South Weymouth, When the Airbase Hummed.**

NAS South Weymouth

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Sitting on the hardscrabble desert floor at the Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Center (AMARC), a.k.a. the *boneyard* in Tucson, Arizona, are Navy H-2 Sea Sprite helicopters from HSL – 74 (Helicopter anti-submarine squadron [light]) the last flying helicopter squadron at NAS South Weymouth.



Navy H2 Helicopter 151311 on tarmac at NAS South Weymouth - undated, prior to 1992. US Navy Photo



Same Navy H2 Helicopter 151311 in the Boneyard - 2008.

These forlorn helicopters are symbolic of the demise of military presence on the South Shore. Now in 2008, as Naval Air Station (NAS) South Weymouth, or SOWEY as the sailors called it, is about to be redeveloped following years of caretaker status and wrangling by various entities to devour the facility. With the razing of the buildings and bulldozing of the runways the last trace of a one-time substantial military presence on the South Shore will be obliterated.

“It’s sad to what is happening to the base. I have many good memories of life there,” said former full-time Navy Reservist (TAR), YN1 Mary Ellen White, and current 911 operator for the Hull Police Department. “I grew up in South Weymouth and remember seeing blimps flying over my house.

“It’s a loss for the entire community,” White continued. “SOWEY was a good neighbor. The CO of the base opened the base exchange and commissary to residents during the 1978 blizzard while other sailors went and filled sand bags in Hull during the storm. Firefighters from SOWEY fought fires in the community alongside various town firefighters when asked.

“Now veterans don’t have a place to gather and the community doesn’t get to see our military up close, so the disconnect of those who have had military experience and those who haven’t grows. And the South Shore loses more character as more development fills the few remaining undeveloped areas.”



Navy H2 helicopters from HSL-74, the last flying squadron at NAS South Weymouth in the boneyard near Tucson, AZ - 2006.

“My stay at SOWEY will always hold fond memories for me. It was great duty, there,” said former Navy Petty Officer Wayne Griffith of Poplar Bluff, Missouri. “We were laid back and had great hours. It had a great community. Everyone had a lot of pride in what they were doing there.”

“I lived on base for a while and in Weymouth, Rockland, and Brockton. The people there seemed to really respect the military, and sailors at SOWEY tried hard to be good neighbors.”



EA-6 from
NAS South Weymouth
in boneyard - 2006.



NAS South Weymouth was the last fully functional (albeit small) military base on the South Shore. Presently, all that remains for military on the South Shore is a Navy Operational Support Center (Reserve Center) in Quincy, three Massachusetts Army National Guard Units; one each in Braintree, Quincy, Hingham, and the Coast Guard in Hull. Following the closure of the Boston Navy Yard, SOWEY was the closet military facility to Boston.

Military bases on the South Shore saved unique and vital acreage from merciless development; the former Fort Revere in Hull is a park, but Fort Duvall on Hog Island (bridged to Hull) is a condo development. The Navy Ammunition Depot (NAD) in Hingham and its annex in Cohasset are now Bare Cove Park and Wompatuck State Park. The Navy owning both sides of the Back River to operate NAD Hingham saved the river from development. Other former military sites have not fared so well: a Coastal Artillery Corp tower in Marshfield is a home and there are no traces of NAS Squantum. The former NIKE missile sites in Hingham, and Quincy are long gone, but the NIKE site in Weymouth has been converted to Webb Park.



Coastal Artillery Corp tower, Marshfield – 1992.



Marine barracks at NAD Hingham – 1944. National Archives Photo.

Expanding the circle further the Navy at one time had a substantial presence in New England: the Boston Navy Yard, the Chelsea Naval Hospital, and various military establishments on a number of the Boston Harbor Islands. Rhode Island in particular had a very significant Navy presence. Sadly, throughout New England the presence of our military has diminished greatly.

Construction of SOWEY began in September 1941. During World War II it served as a base for the Navy's Lighter Than Air dirigibles (blimps) that patrolled the Northeastern United States' shores during World War II. It closed shortly after the war.

For several years after the war it served as an aircraft storage facility. As air traffic in and out of Boston grew NAS Squantum closed and relocated to South Weymouth. NAS South Weymouth officially reopened in 1953 and was in continuous use until September 30, 1997.



NAS Squantum – undated. US Navy Photo

In 1995 when the Navy recommended South Weymouth for closure, the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) said he wanted a fully capable naval airfield in the Northeast and SOWEY didn't have the room to expand. The Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) commission voted to close NAS South Weymouth. When SOWEY closed most of the activity relocated to NAS Brunswick, Maine.

Paradoxically, the 2005 BRAC commission overrode the Navy's desire to hold onto NAS Brunswick in a caretaker status and ordered it to be closed, too. The Navy now has to use commercial, Air Force, Air Force Reserve, and Air Guard bases when operating in Northeastern United States.

Questions were raised at each BRAC hearing about the wisdom of leaving the Northeast vulnerable. The nature of warfare and our enemy has changed, but there remains a need for land to use for military and defense purposes.

Were the government to try and reestablish a military base in the Northeast it would be a lengthy, difficult, and expensive fight. The Navy is trying to establish an outlying field in rural North Carolina and has encountered a lot of resistance. Although a Joint Reserve Base (JRB) could be established at Otis Air National Guard Base/Camp Edwards the legal and logistical wrangling would be extensive.



NAD Hingham Annex -
1989



Fort Revere in Hull – 1992.

At one time SOWEY was part of an extensive network of 17 Navy Reserve training bases throughout the country. Atlanta, GA: Columbus, OH: Dallas, TX: Denver, CO: Glenview, IL: Grosse Ile, MI: Los Alamitos, CA: Miami, FL: Minneapolis, MN: New Orleans, LA: New York, NY: Niagara Falls, NY: Oakland, CA: Olathe, KS: Seattle, WA, and Willow Grove, PA. Almost none of these bases exist as Naval Air Stations anymore. JRB Willow Grove was ordered closed during the 2005 BRAC and Dallas exists as a JRB.

From the 1959 Air Operations summary report SOWEY was an extensive operation with more than a dozen squadrons and detachments operating there: Naval Air Development Unit, GCA Unit 48, 1 ZP Squadron (Occasional), Naval & Marine Air Reserve Units, AWS-91(L), VR-911, 912, 913, 914, CVFAS-911, AIRTU-911, 912, BARTU-911(L), VS-911, 912, 913, 914, 915, 916, VP-911, 912, 913, 914, HS-911, 912, 913, MARTD, VMA-217, 322, HMR-771, MACS-2, and MARG-4.

According to the same air operations summary report, SOWEY's mission, in part was to, "operate and service aircraft and airships as assigned by the Chief of Naval Operations for detection, tracking, and interception functions in air defense systems, and for utility flights in connection with the transportation of special equipment and personnel."

Further, “[it was to] provide available aircraft services for Project LINCOLN at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and assist that project in the design, development, and test of equipment and systems used in the above functions. As directed, participate in experimental or prototype air defense and ASW systems which may be established to determine their effectiveness.”

NAS South Weymouth was a small and cherished component of the South Shore. As it succumbs to redevelopment plans the loss of both the military presence and the open green area is sad.

Like SOWEY, the future for these helicopters is bleak. They will sit in caretaker status until a strike board of Naval Aviators visits AMARC and decides which aircraft will be struck from the service. In most cases, the aircraft will be shredded. Some will be used as target practice and some will be held until the H2's in US or foreign military service are grounded. A couple may end up on display somewhere. Naval Air Station South Weymouth will be converted to homes and shopping areas. Slowly but surely its long and proud service to New England will reduce to a footnote in the City of Weymouth history and a memorial plaque will be hung somewhere.