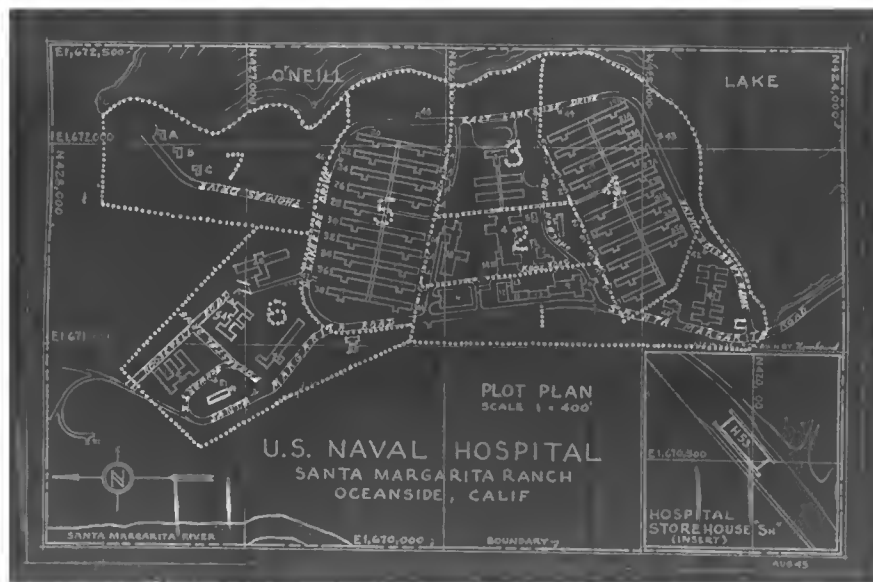


NAVY MEDICINE ON THE SANTA MARGARITA RANCH: A LOOK BACK AT NAVAL HOSPITAL CAMP PENDLETON'S FIRST YEARS

"My first duty station was Santa Margarita Ranch in Oceanside. I had my choice of duty stations anywhere in the U.S. but a buddy of mine talked me into going to the Santa Margarita Ranch because I liked to ride horses. I figured that a ranch would be just fine. I didn't know that it was Camp Pendleton."

~Hospitalman Dan Skiles, USN[1]

It's 1943.[2] As the war rages across the globe, a surge of combat casualties are flooding back stateside from places like Guadalcanal, Tarawa, and New Guinea. To meet the increasing demand for medical care, the Navy establishes over 30 new hospitals in the year.[3] Among them is a facility located 40 miles north of San Diego called "Naval Hospital Santa Margarita Ranch, Oceanside." [4]



Naval Hospital Santa Margarita Ranch plans, Aug., 1943. (BUMED archives)

Commissioned on Sept. 3, 1943, Naval Hospital Santa Margarita Ranch operated from a series of wooden structures along the western shore of Lake O'Neill in the heart of the newly opened Marine Corps training center, Camp Joseph H. Pendleton, Calif.

The "Santa Margarita" name was rooted in centuries past when Spanish explorer Gaspar de Portolá established a camp at the future Marine Corps base on Jul. 20th, 1769—the feast day of St. Margaret of Antioch.[5] In the years following, Portolá's campsite would serve as a home for a Spanish mission and later a succession of cattle ranches operated by the "Pico" and "O'Neill" families.[6]

In 1941 and 1942, the Navy purchased 126,435 acres of the old Santa Margarita Ranch for use as a Marine Corps training base.[7] Original plans called for construction of a series of dispensaries and a 600-bed naval hospital, but due to its rapid expansion the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery (BUMED) recommended that the proposed hospital be doubled in size. When the hospital opened in 1943 it had a capacity of 1,228 beds.

The new medical facility comprised 20 pavilion type one-story wards,[8] an administration building, a physio-laboratory, a medical storehouse, as well as quarters for nurses, corpsmen, WAVES, bachelors and married officers.



Aerial view of the Naval Hospital Santa Margarita Ranch (later known as Naval Hospital Camp Pendleton), ca. 1940s. (BUMED archives)

Initially, Santa Margarita treated the sick and injured from the training base as well as the overflow patients from Naval Hospitals San Diego and Corona.[9] In Oct. 1944, BUMED designated it a “service dependent treatment” facility further expanding its patient pool.[10] The hospital would reach a peak wartime census of 1,584 patients in Jun. 1945.[11]

What made Naval Hospital Santa Margarita unique during the war years was its role in the rehabilitation of the so-called “cord-bladder” patients. These were service personnel who suffered grievous injuries to their spinal cords leading to a loss of bladder control.

At Santa Margarita, urologist Cmdr. Gershom Thompson (1901-1975) sought to re-instill a sense of dignity for these patients and free them from dependence on catheters. Prior to the war, Thompson had pioneered new techniques for transurethral surgical resections while at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester,

Minnesota. He would introduce these techniques at Santa Margarita Ranch and establish what would become the Navy's first program for treating cord-bladder injuries.[12],[13],[14]



Cmdr. Gershom Thompson, Sr., was a renowned urologist from the Mayo Clinic who transformed Santa Margarita Ranch into the Navy's Cord-Bladder Treatment Center. Used with permission of the Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research. (Photo courtesy of BUMED Historian)

Thompson oversaw the remodeling of the hospital's wards to better accommodate patients.[15] He would establish a vocational rehabilitation program, an orthopedic brace shop, and enlist the services of physical and occupational therapists and technicians.

On May 9, 1945, BUMED officially designated the Naval Hospital Santa Margarita Ranch as the Navy Cord-Bladder Treatment Center.[16]

Thompson would return to civilian life in 1946 and the treatment center that he helped build would ultimately be disestablished at war's end.[17]

In the months after the war, Navy officials expressed some concern about keeping the hospital fully staffed during the period of demobilization and questioned whether or not it should follow suit of other wartime facilities. And even though bed capacity would be reduced in 1946, plans for disestablishment did not materialize.[18]

Over the next decades the original wooden structures of Santa Margarita Ranch would be torn down and replacement hospitals were constructed in the 1970s and 2010s.

“Santa Margarita Ranch” would remain the hospital’s official name until Aug. 1950 when it was re-designated the “Naval Hospital Camp Joseph H. Pendleton, Oceanside, Calif.” In May 1967, the name was shortened and is now known as: “Naval Hospital Camp Pendleton”.

[1] Skiles, Dan, Oral History (Conducted by Herman, Jan and A.B. Sobocinski), 2 and 5 May 2002. Oral History Collection. BUMED Archives.

[2] Over the years Navy medical personnel would pioneer the usage of blood plasma in field surgery, and penicillin for treating gas gangrene, pneumonia and local infections. The year would see the advent of the first women corpsmen, dentists and physicians in the Navy and one of the most significant periods of growth.

[3] Santa Margarita Ranch would be would of 33 hospitals placed in commission in 1943. Others included: Aiea Heights, HI, Asheville, NC, Bainbridge, MD, Camp Lejeune, NC, Farragut, ID, Fort Eustace, VA, Glenwood Springs, CO, Memphis, TN, New Orleans, LA, Sampson, NY, San Juan, PR, Santa Cruz, CA, Shoemaker, CA, St. Albans, NY, Sun Valley, ID, Trinidad, BWI, and Yosemite, CA. An additional 10 base hospitals and six mobile hospitals were commissioned that year. Many of these were established as temporary facilities placed in operation during the war effort.

[4] To avoid confusion with the town of Santa Margarita Ranch in Central California, the Naval Hospital was officially designated “Naval Hospital Santa Margarita Ranch, Oceanside, California.” It was sometimes referred to simply as “Naval Hospital Oceanside.”

[5] On the liturgical calendar every day is associated with the life of a Saint. A Feast Day is a day of remembrance of the Saint’s life. Margaret of Antioch is the patron saint of pregnant women, childbirth, people with kidney diseases, and people who are severely ill.

[6] Campsite was established on July 20th, 1769. “Rancho Santa Margarita Y Las Flores,” California Ranchos (Retrieved from: <http://factcards.califa.org/ran/santamargaritaylasflores.html>)

[7] “History of the Medical Department for Marine Training and Replacement Command San Diego Area, Camp Joseph H. Pendleton, Oceanside, California” 1951. Camp Pendleton, Naval Hospital Collection. BUMED Archives.

[8] These included neuropsychiatric, EENT, medical and surgery, urology, and isolation wards.

[9] Naval Hospital Corona was located in Riverside County, Calif. It was in operation from 1941 to 1949 and 1951 to 1957.

[10] McIntire, Ross to CM Eleven. “Hospitalization of Dependents; Designation of Naval Hospital Santa Margarita Ranch.” 12 December 1944. NH71/P7. General Correspondence Files. NARA II College Park, MD.

[11] *The History of the Medical Department of the United States Navy in World War II. The Statistics of Diseases and Injuries* (NAVMED P-1318). Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1950.

[12] Thompson would present five case studies of patients who successfully underwent surgery at the Santa Margarita Ranch in his article, “Cord Bladder: Restoration of Function by Transurethral Operation.” *U.S. Naval Medical Bulletin*, Vol. 45, August 1945.

[13] Thompson’s work was not universally accepted. Dr. Oswald Lowlsey, honorary consultant to the Surgeon General of the Navy, derided the procedure. Thompson would personally invite Lowlsey to Santa Margarita Ranch 4 April 1946 and note marked success of the program (Thompson, Gershon to Oswald Lowlsey, 14 April 1945. NH71/P3-3.)

[14] Thompson would write to Lowlsey: “It is amazing to me how well these paralyzed patients get along without a catheter, empty their bladder by straining with the abdominal muscles and stay perfectly dry between urination. I have a number who sleep all night perfectly dry between urination, I have a number who sleep all night perfectly continent or who during the day walk on crutches ... I have the feeling that a great deal can be accomplished to make the life of these poor unfortunate veterans of Saipan and elsewhere somewhat brighter than it had been heretofore.” Thompson, Gershon to Oswald Lowlsey, 14 April 1945. General Correspondence Files. NARA II College Park, MD.

[15] Two wards each containing 41 beds and facing Lake O’Neil would be designated for cord-bladder patients. Wards would be fitted with Hubbard Tanks for treatment of decubitus ulcers.

[16] McIntire, Ross to ComEleven. “Center for treatment of “cord bladder, establishment of.” 9 May 1945. NH71/P3-3. General Correspondence Files. NARA II College Park, MD.

[17] SMR’s Cord-Bladder Treatment Center was disestablished in October 1945 and patients transferred to Naval Hospital Corona, CA.

[18] Hospital bed capacity was reduced to 920 in 1946. Swanson, C.A. to Medical Officer in Command, U.S. Naval Hospital Santa Margarita Ranch Oceanside, California. “Authorized Bed Capacity, Revision of.” 20 December 1946. NH71/A1-1. General Correspondence Files. NARA II College Park, MD.