

## Abandoned & Little-Known Airfields:

### California - Pacific Islands

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San Clemente Naval Auxiliary Air Station,

San Clemente Island, CA

32.95 North / 118.53 West (South of Catalina Island, CA)



A 1944 aerial view of the old San Clemente NAAS (National Archives photo).

The first airstrip on San Clemente Island was located in the center of the island.

Its date of construction is unknown.

The earliest reference to the airfield which has been located is The Airport Directory Company's 1937 Airports Directory (courtesy of Bob Rambo). It described "San Clemente Island Aux" as having two 1,600' "sandy loam" runways.

A program to improve the airfield was begun in 1938.

The Works Progress Administration & a contractor built two runways (3,000' & 2,000') and a hangar.

The construction was completed by 1941.

With the outbreak of WW2, a Marine scouting squadron began operating from the airfield in 1942

with 19 Vought SB2U Vindicators & a single Grumman J2F Duck.

That same year another construction project commenced to extend the runways,  
and an Army detachment activated two radar stations on the island.

The airfield was commissioned as Naval Auxiliary Air Facility San Clemente Island in 1943.

The station was evaluated for blimp operations

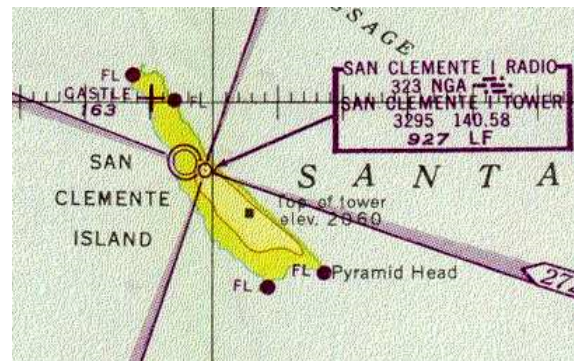
but was deemed unsuitable due to the island's strong & unpredictable winds.

It was used for bomb testing, radar training, fighter gunnery training, and electronic countermeasures.

The earliest depiction which has been located of the San Clemente NAAS as a 1944 National Archives aerial view.

It depicted the field as having 2 asphalt runways, with a clearing for a 3<sup>rd</sup> runway,  
and a ramp with a hangar & several buildings on the south side.

In 1945, in spite of the previous negative evaluation for blimp suitability,  
blimps from Santa Ana & Del Mar began averaging 3 landings at San Clemente per week.



The 1945 Mojave AAF Chart (courtesy of Chris Kennedy) depicted San Clemente as having a control tower.

The March 1951 San Diego USAF Sectional Chart (courtesy of Chris Kennedy)

described "NAAS San Clemente Island" as being "closed".

"San Clemente OLF (Navy)" was depicted on the 1953 San Diego-San Francisco Flight Chart (courtesy of Scott O'Donnell),

which described the field as having a 5,000' hard-surfaced runway.

"San Clemente OLF" was listed among active airfields in the "Aerodromes" table

on the 1955 San Diego Sectional Aeronautical Chart (courtesy of John Voss).

It described the field as having three "oil seal treated" runways (the longest being 5,000').

Strangely, although this airfield was included in the table of active airfields,

"San Clemente OLF" was listed among active airfields in the "Aerodromes" table

on the 1955 San Diego Sectional Aeronautical Chart (courtesy of John Voss).

It described the field as having three "oil seal treated" runways (the longest being 5,000').

Strangely, although this airfield was included in the table of active airfields,

the remarks say simply, "Closed".

Charles Geeslin recalled, "I was stationed at San Clemente from 1958 to October 1960.

The North Field (Castle) was already open.

I was a radar operator in the Air Force & had free run of the island.

We worked on 21 days & off the island 7 days for retreat in Long Beach.

I was also in civilian flight training at Long Beach where I received my license in 1960.

During that time I flew a tricycle-gear Champ out to the North runway several times & to the old runway once,

communicating with the radar site on 121.5 as the Champ had no UHF.

Before the Seabees & Peter Kiewit completed the Castle runway

we were often airlifted out of the old runway to Long Beach in civilian Grumman Gooses or in DC-3s.

Eventually almost all the Gooses flipped on landing at Catalina

so we then switched to the North Castle runway and got out on DC-3s.

The radar site at San Clemente was responsible for all the Southern & seaward airspace in the 11<sup>th</sup> Naval District

even though we were Air Force.

We used to scramble units all the way from George AFB to March & El Toro, Miramar and NAS North Island.  
We often controlled Navy P5M's out of San Diego for surface intercepts of suspicious targets or unusual weather."

In 1961 the original airfield in the middle of the island was evidently closed,  
after being replace by the much larger [San Clemente Naval Auxiliary Landing Field](#) on the northern end of the island.

A preliminary study was carried out in the same year by the Naval Ordnance Test Station,  
China Lake, for a major renovation of the old landing field.  
This study included renovation and/or enlargement of a number of the berthing,  
messing, administrative, utility, and aircraft support facilities.  
Apparently this was never done, and the old airfield remained inactive.

In 1971, a civilian group headed by Congressman Anderson and the Marine Parks and Harbor Association  
attempted to obtain civilian yachting access to Pyramid Cove.  
This group suggested that the Navy could move their bombardment range to San Nicolas Island.  
It also recommended that the old airfield could be renovated for civilian aircraft use,  
while possibly including a restaurant at the terminal.  
This attempt was unsuccessful.

Fleet Composite Squadron 3 inaugurated their new island operations and support facilities in 1971.  
VC-3 launched jet target drones for surface ship target practice from the old deactivated airfield.  
VC-3 has since been deactivated,  
and it is not known if the old airfield has been used since for any drone operations, or anything else.

Chuck Ross recalled flying in to San Clemente.  
"The best trip though was in about 1977  
when we took some civilian contractors out there.  
The Navy was offering a contract to clean up the site of the old airfield up on top of the island.

We pilots went with them to survey the job.

There were acres of scrap around the old ramps,  
including deck guns & the wreckage of several Navy airplanes.

Fascinating browsing in that stuff."

Only a single runway (the east/west runway) was depicted on the 1977 USGS topo map, labeled "Landing Strip".



As seen in the 1994 USGS aerial photo,  
the remains of the airfield consisted of 3 paved runways (the longest is 5,200'),  
and a concrete ramp south of the runways.

The primary runway was in better shape than the smaller runways, which were barely perceptible.

The foundations of former buildings were apparent on & around the ramp,  
along with some small buildings which remained standing.

The airfield was not depicted at all (even as an abandoned airfield) on 2002 aeronautical charts.



A 2006 aerial photo showed that the remains of all 3 runways still were recognizable.

The ramp area appeared to be used for the storage of unidentified items.







[A pre-2010 aerial view looking west at the remains of the San Clemente runways \(courtesy of Mark Richardson\).](#)

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