

## Coast Country Memories of Camp Wallace 2003 Alecyia Gallaway



National Archives

On December 29, 1944, “The Square knot” a weekly newspaper for Camp Wallace reviewed eight months of “Navy Wallace” and in closing listed these memories of Wallace that leave us with a vivid glimpse of the ecological past.

Oleander and Cape jasmine

Dusty Shell Roads

Cattle Cars to Houston

Texas Oil Flares with Cattle Crowded Underneath to Keep Warm

Burning Prairies

How it Can Rain

Frogs that Sound Like Billy Goats

MOSQUITOS

Marching in Mud so Thick that Your Boots Weigh 20lbs Apiece

Cattle bunched up in a Mosquito Free Swath of a DDT Sprayed Prairie

August Dog Days

The “Amusement Park” Lights of Texas City Rising Above the Flat Prairie

Rattlesnakes, Jack Rabbits and Horny Toads

Clear Night Skies With Stars You Can Almost Touch<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “The Square Knot”, December 29, 1944, Volume 3, Number 4, United States Naval Training and Distribution Center, Camp Wallace Texas.

Ten months before the bombing of Pearl Harbor, an army replacement center or basic training camp opened on the upland prairies of Hitchcock in Galveston County. Named Camp Wallace in honor of Col. Elmer J. Wallace, former commander of the 59<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery Regiment, who was killed in France during World War I, the camp was built on 3,315 acres of cattle range. The land came into possession of the United States Military by a “Declaration of Taking” in October of 1940 and consisted of the following acreage; Maco Stewart et al 1,254.8 acres, George W. Fraser 340.6 acres, James Belcher 7.8 acres, and 1,712.7 acres that were leased from 5 adjacent landowners.<sup>2</sup>

Construction began in November 1940 with a 3.9-mile railroad spur off of the Gulf, Colorado, & Santa Fe tracks and 17 miles of oyster shell roads. The shell was dredged from Red Fish Bar, the last remaining vestige of the barrier reef across Galveston Bay, and was transported up Dickinson Bayou by barge and trucked to Hitchcock. The water supply came from the Galveston water supply wells at Alta Loma in 30” water mains and a sewage plant capable of handling 1,050,000 gallons of raw sewage was erected. By the end of December 1940, construction began on the 399 buildings and 29 miles of electrical lines.<sup>3</sup>

Camp Wallace opened on February 1, 1941 and by May 1941 approximately 10,250 military and civilians trained, worked, and lived there. It was also used as a German Prisoner of War detention camp throughout the war. In July of 1943, Galveston Bay was struck head-on by a destructive hurricane that was classified a military secret. The storm even took the soldiers on training maneuvers by surprise. They could find no refuge on the flooded prairies between Hitchcock and Ellington where they were camped, and it took them two days to get back to Camp Wallace.<sup>4</sup>



National Archives

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<sup>2</sup> United States Military Declaration of Taking, Galveston County Clerk records, December 28, 1942.

<sup>3</sup> Galveston Daily News, “Production of Oyster Shell Is Important Local Industry,” April 11, 1942.

<sup>4</sup> Houston Chronicle, “Camp Wallace recruits do Battle with Hurricane,” September 19, 1993, sec. C, p. 12.

On April 30<sup>th</sup> 1944 at a joint ceremony the control of Camp Wallace was transferred from the Army to the Navy, and it became a naval boot camp and distribution center.<sup>5</sup>



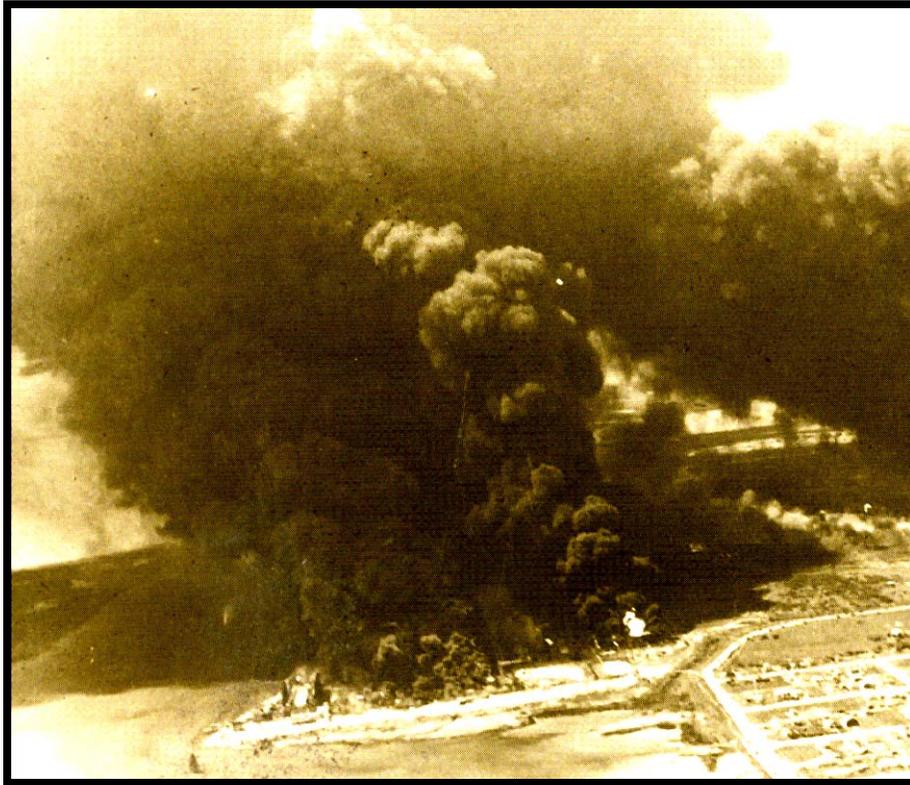
The Square Knot, Dec. 1944

Japan surrendered on August 14, and September 2, 1945 became V-J Day. From September 1945 to September 1946, Wallace became a naval separation center where Navy officers and enlisted men were debriefed before being discharged. By April 3, 1946, 50,000 discharges had gone through the separation center.



<sup>5</sup> "The Square Knot," December 29, 1944, Volume 3, Number 4, United States Naval Training and Distribution Center, Camp Wallace Texas.

On October 15, 1946 the site came under the custody of the War Assets Administration.



Moore Memorial Public Library

The Texas City disaster began on April 16, 1947 when two Liberty Ships, the Grand Camp and the High Flyer, loaded with ammonium nitrate caught fire and exploded. The first ship the Grand Camp went up at about 9:00 A.M. with a blast that knocked 2 small planes out of the sky, created a fifteen-foot surge of water that carried a barge inland, and threw three-ton fragments of the ship into the sky to rain down on the city. Shortly after 1:00 A.M. on April 17<sup>th</sup>, the High Flyer exploded with a blast that rivaled the power of the first. Burning chunks of steel fell from the night sky causing crude oil tanks to explode and refinery buildings to catch on fire.

Even before the second blast the residents of Texas City began a massive exodus with approximately 40% leaving, some for days and others until new housing could be built. Camp Wallace would become a refugee center for many of the victims of the blast. As more and more bodies were uncovered from the wreckage cold storage became a necessity; 150 bodies and numerous body parts were moved to the cold storage vaults at Camp Wallace. On May 11, the last body was removed from the dock and the victim lists compiled by the American Red Cross and the Texas Department of Public Safety contained 405 identified dead, 63 unidentified dead, 113 missing, and 3,500 hospitalized.

Two thousand people were left homeless, 539 houses were condemned. Many of these refugees would call Camp Wallace home for many months as the city was rebuilt.<sup>6</sup>

That same year the United States Government declared Camp Wallace “surplus,” and ordered the removal of its buildings. These buildings were moved throughout the area to become school annexes, community buildings, businesses, and homes. The land would either be returned to the original owners or declared surplus.<sup>7</sup>

The University of Houston held 915 acres of the surplus land until 1972 when 631 acres was released to Galveston County, and 45.6 acres was deeded to the Hitchcock Independent School District. Today the remaining 200 plus acres of land owned by the University of Houston is home to the Houston Coastal Center.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> American Red Cross. “Concise Report of the American Red Cross in the Texas City Disaster of April 16, 1947.” Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas.

Archival Records, The Texas City Disaster. Moore Public Library, Texas City.

Stephens, Hugh W., 1997, The Texas City Disaster, 1947, University Texas Press: Austin.

<sup>7</sup> The Galveston Daily News. “Camp Wallace, once bustling military facility has all but disappeared,” April 22, 1988, p. 10 Maury Darst.

<sup>8</sup> The Galveston Daily News. “Earmarked for park purposes Land in Camp Wallace Area declared Surplus,” September 23, 1972, p. 1A, Joel Kirkpatrick, and “Camp Wallace Land Given to County, Schools,” February 17, 1973, p. 1A, Joel Kirkpatrick.