

How the Alameda Aero Club Landed at Oakland Airport

by Myrna van Lunteren


Oakland Airport abuts Alameda's Harbor Bay Parkway, which runs along Alameda's former Municipal Golf Course, which is part of Alameda's Bay Farm Island. Oakland Airport has two areas, the 'South Field', which is the commercial Oakland International Airport, known by most people in the area, and the 'North Field', which is the General Aviation area. This is where the Blue Angels park when they come to visit during Fleet Week, this is where business jets land to allow Very Important People to go to Very Important Meetings. And this is where small aircraft take off for short trips.

Fans of General Aviation, private pilots, know about the Alameda Aero Club. It is located on Oakland Airport's North Field, with the office / club house (more accurately a club room) in one of the metal hangars to the north end of runway 15 (near Doolittle Drive), with the planes tied down nearby.

Why isn't this club called the Oakland Aero Club, then?

Above the office, accessible by a pull-down ladder are old member records, meeting records and the original record book of check rides and major events, tucked into a drawer of a dusty filing cabinet. These files tell the story.

Around 1973, an Aero Club was formed at NAS (Naval Air Station), Alameda, called, NAS Alameda Aero Club. By 1974 the club was listed in the NAS Alameda introductory brochure:



N.A.S. ALAMEDA AERO CLUB
C/O POSTAL DIRECTORY
N.A.S. ALAMEDA, CALIF. 94501

**AERO CLUB, Building 317,
Extension 2636**

Flight instruction and recreation flying in eight club-owned aircraft. Active duty military personnel and dependents, full-time civilian employees of Department of Defense, and reserve military personnel are eligible for membership.

From the first pages of the first record book, started in 1973, it appears the club had over 500 members at that time. The planes in those early years included a few Cessna 150s, a Cessna 172 (Skyhawk), a Cessna 177 (Cardinal), a Piper Cherokee (P-28-180), a Mooney M21, a Piper Cherokee PA 32, and a Citabria. Leading figures in this organization were Vernon Wesley Vonheeder, A.W. Burri, and Andrew Q. McDonough, and Roger Brower. Vonheeder around this time was General Foreman at the Naval Aviation Depot, Alameda. Young Andrew Q. McDonough was hired as Manager and later Chief Flight Instructor at the Aero Club and would later move on to fly for commercial airlines. Al Burri was a WWII veteran and one of the club's CFII's (Certified Flight Instructor – Instrument).

But, everything has ups and downs. No more entries are found by McDonough after 1978 – apparently, he had gotten a job with an airline. One also sees that by 1983, Vonheeder becomes much less prominent; this corresponds with the death of his wife. After this, Vonheeder left the area.

Another change, in 1983, was the appointment of a new Commander, Commodore D.B. Cargill, who was given the command of the Pacific Navy bases, including Naval Air Station, Alameda. Commodore Cargill felt the military station was not a suitable place for the small private aircraft, nor did he care to deal with the civilians. After about a year on the job, he ousted the Flying Club from NAS.

Hurriedly, Doug Johnson, with Roger M. Brower, Wallace (Wally) A. Johnson, Robert (Bob) C. Stover, Terry W. Moore, and Eugene (Gene) Simonalle formed a new, civilian, Board, and dropped 'NAS' from the club name. They also found the location on the North Field and the Alameda Aero Club was incorporated September 13, 1985.

The new organization was on shaky ground for a while, as the board was trying to convince former NAS Aero Club members to join the new club. Not all planes, officially owned by the Navy, made it, but by March, 1985, the new board managed to get their hands on a couple of Cessnas, and were working on getting the Seneca II, and another C-172.



Home of the Alameda Aero Club at the Oakland Airport's North Field.

Although the added number of planes was minimal, the number of flights over residential areas of Bay Farm Island and Alameda's East End did increase. Complaints were logged with the City of Alameda. The City negotiated with the airport (Port of Oakland) officials to establish procedures for noise abatement on take-off... However, these procedures were not shared with the Federal Aviation Authority, and so not known to unfamiliar aircraft.

As a result, combined with off-line radar for the field on March 31, 1987, airport controllers did not sufficiently distance two aircraft. The pilots did not or could not see each other, and CFI Anastasia "Stacy" Snyder (25) of Fremont, and her student, 19-year old Scott Lindsey of Alameda, going up for his second lesson, were involved in a mid-air collision with a cargo plane flown by David Bolesky (25) of Redding. The death of these three young people forced the formulating of more strict separation rules around the airport.

With increased business at the Oakland Airport, today the Aero Club planes are only a small portion of aircraft on the field. At the same time, Bay Farm Island especially has been completely developed. Although regulations aim to prevent planes flying over housing for noise abatement, when the wind does not come from the prevailing direction, or when distance needs to be created between airplanes for safety, sometimes planes are told to fly over houses, giving the pilots and passengers a rare birds-eye view over Alameda's tree-lined streets.

Nonetheless, regardless of up and downs in membership and number of planes, partially associated with economic ups and downs of the Bay Area, the Alameda Aero Club continues to prosper at the Oakland Airport.