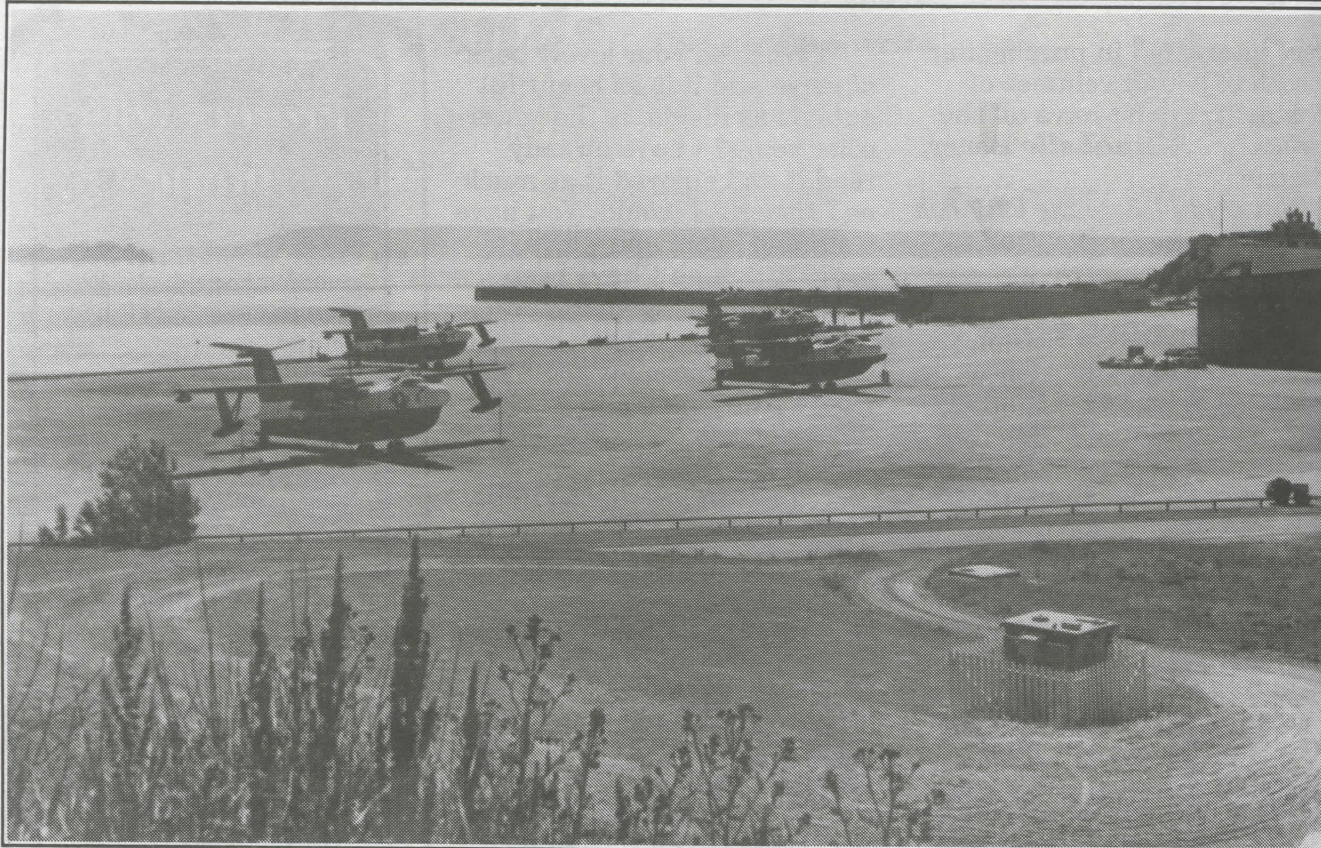


Spindrift Two

\$1.00



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The Seaplane Base at Oak Harbor at the beginning of World War II, looking east toward Camano Island. The big PBYS and PBMs flew in from the Aleutian Islands, landing in Crescent Harbor. Today the Seaplane Base is occupied by the Navy Commissary and Exchange, and various other Whidbey Island Naval Air Station support services.

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Seaplane Base and the 'Lilly'

When the Navy came to Whidbey Island to install the Whidbey Naval Air Station the little town of Oak Harbor was swamped. There were not enough stores or services to cope with the influx of military men and their families. Housing was being built but was not yet ready. Old timers, whose forebears had wrested their lands from the forests from a century to a half century ago slowly moved to new pastures in Skagit county.

And Maylor's Point that had held two homes plus three or four on the narrow neck of land that connected the point with the mainland became the focal point of the Navy installations known as the Seaplane Base.

It is said that Whidbey Island had always been the Navy's best kept secret. Ralph Poole, former Oak Harbor Councilman, told of being one of the first Navy men to come to Whidbey, and he and two others were on their way and stopped in Seattle to ask for directions. "Just go north, and look for signs," they were told.

When Hugh Brainard told his wife they had orders to Whidbey Island in 1961, Lee, who was a Tacoma native, asked, "And where is that supposed to be?"

It is part of the history of the air station that when the base was planned, a mess hall was not included. When queried, the powers that be said they expected the sailors here to be bused to Seattle to eat! That would have taken a chunk out

of a day's workhours.

The first planes at the Seaplane Base were the PBYs and PBMs, big-bodied patrol planes that roared and splashed down in Crescent Harbor. They flew out of Alaska bases as an advanced training base for PBY crews and it seemed to Oak Harborites that there was always a PBY in the air circling out of Crescent Harbor, around the Point, over Oak Harbor, to touch down on Crescent Harbor and repeat. It was great training too for Oak Harbor residents who had been suddenly transported from the Great Depression world into the Pearl Harbor Crisis. It was new and scary, and everyone went to work.

Austin Company took over the building of barracks, hangers, offices and housing. It was a perfect place for a training base.

The driftwood in Crescent Harbor was the only deterrent. But that was taken care of by the Dunlap Towing Company of La Conner, which secured the contract for keeping the driftwood out of contact with the big flying boats. The little tug, "Lilly" set its watch for Crescent Harbor. All a PBY had to do was run into a floating log in the bay while taking off or landing, and down she would go with a hole in the hull. PBYs and driftwood did not go together.

Mel Neil, a farmer who was accustomed as all Whidbey

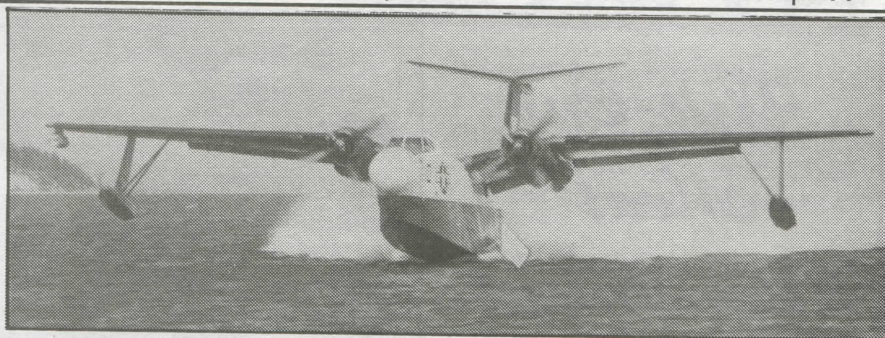
Islanders were, to ferries, launches and daily mail and cargo boats, captained the Lilly, and the Seaplane Base enjoyed the reality of never having had an encounter with a PBY and a floating log!

Neil thoroughly enjoyed his work as the big planes roared around the Point and settled in Crescent Harbor. Knowledgeable concerning available seafood in the area, he put down crabpots on the eastern edge of Crescent Harbor, and the young Navy Lieutenants at the Seaplane Base thought heaven had arrived!

They fashioned a cooking pot over a makeshift fireplace and crab became the entree of the day. As the housing on what had been Eerkes Hill was finished to become the Victory Homes, the young officers moved their families into the shelters overlooking the Crescent and Oak Harbor bays, happy to have housing of any kind.

In the 1950s, a local group made an effort to get a PBY installed on the bluff high overlooking the Crescent Harbor Seaplane Base. A plane was located in California that would cost \$20,000 with the engine removed. There wasn't that much money, and the opportunity died.

Bereft of its lumbering seaplanes, the Seaplane Base still lives in Oak Harbor. It is the site of the Navy Exchange and Commissary, and the city's marina and yacht club. ♦



They didn't find gold, but they found land

The 1849 Gold Rush to California spawned a number of disappointed gold-seekers, who cast about for other sources of fortune. If they couldn't find gold, they could have land, and the Donation Claim Act led them to the Puget Sound area.

Traveling by water, the first three settlers of Oak Harbor arrived late in December 1849 to what the Indians called the "Big Spring," north of Maylor's Point and west of the Navy game refuge. The Big Spring was known all over this part of the country by the Indians, who stopped for fresh water much as they did at Dugalla Bay farther north.

The three, Martin Taftson, Norwegian; C. W. Sumner, Yankee; and Ulrich Freund, Swiss Army officer, retired, brought their Indian canoe to land at the Big Spring, where they spent the night. The first rays of dawn found them up and exploring the area, and it was recorded that Taftson climbed to the top of the bluff above the spring and shouted "Eureka!" as he viewed the harbor where Oak Harbor is located.

Taftson took the first claim which included the hill where the Navy housing is today; Sumner took the middle claim, and Freund took the hill and land to the west. Freund's great nephew, Arnold Freund, still lives on the property where his children grew up.

Sumner became disenchanted with his claim shortly after his arrival, and left the Island.

Taftson, who married an Indian woman and had two little boys who died at an early age of a measles scourge, lived to be an embittered old man,

He made his home on Scenic Heights where he repaired settlers' shoes for a living, carrying the repaired articles in a sack over his shoulder as he walked to Oak Harbor along the beach.

A discouraging picture of men who had dreams of finding a bonanza in gold, but who settled for second best for land on Whidbey Island.

It was another breed of gold seekers who in 1897 and 1898 joined the Alaska Gold Rush. Farmers and businessmen mortgaged their lands and packed their gear to take their lives in their hands and make the uncertain voyage by boat to Alaska. Everything floatable was used to transport the would be miners and the treacherous waterways and shoals proved a graveyard for many on the way to the gold fields. In Alaska they joined the hundreds who had come, many with families who negotiated the treacherous trails to the goldfields.

Elmer Calhoun, early settler and former Mayor of Coupeville who made the trip to Alaska before 1900 told of the horrors of the gold rush over icy trails crowded with ill-equipped gold seekers. He told of the people, in light clothing, and even some women carrying babies who made the trip, their hopes fixed on the gold strike that would make them rich. Many sacrificed their families' lives for the dream.

Calhoun told of working on Sulfur Creek claim, taking out around \$10 in gold in several pans and only two or three dollars in others. Ten dollars was very good wages, but not considered a "strike."

The 1898 Island County

Times reported on a rich quartz strike near Ketchikan owned by two men, Johnson and Dyer. Dyer was Capt. Charles P. Dyer of Whidbey Island, grandfather of Norman Dyer of Oak Harbor and the account said in part, "if the rock continues to produce gold at the rate it was begun, Johnson and Dyer have the richest mine in Alaska and a fortune which nothing can exhaust unless they shovel gold into the sea as fast as it can be pounded out."

Governor Swinford of Alaska inspected the find and reported that he never saw anything like that vein. In one week's time the two men cleaned up 26 pounds of pure gold and only worked about eight hours a day!

The gold stood out in spots on the rocks as "thick and big as perspiration on a man's brow" and they hammered it out. In more than a week they had \$32,000 in gold, a sizable fortune for those days!

Captain Edward Barrington of Oak Harbor, whose sons figured extensively in shipping during the Alaska Gold Rush, bought a new schooner, and paid for it by sending word up Skagit River to the Indians that he would pay \$1 per barrel for digging potatoes! The Indians responded and the spud fields were full of workers. During the day an Indian stood beside Captain Barrington on the deck of the schooner and as the potatoes were dumped into the hold, barrel by barrel, the Captain would drop one dollar in silver into the Indian's hand. When he had \$20 in silver, he would exchange it for a \$20 gold piece!





Skaters in about 1910 enjoy an outing on the fresh water slough that ran between the beach and today's Pioneer Avenue West, at the bottom of Freund's Hill. Freund's barn is in the background.

Give Dorothy's books for Christmas

Signed copies of local historian Dorothy Neil's uniquely Island books are available for Christmas giving, including the latest one just off the press, "The Daisy Woods And Other Island Verse," only \$9.60 including tax and postage. Her picture book, "De Ja Views, Historical Pictorial of Whidbey Island," which contains hundreds of old photos dating from the 1860s to 1980, is only \$25 including tax and mailing.

Besides "Daisy Woods" and "De Ja Views," Dorothy's other books, including her two "recipes and reminiscences" volumes of "Savoring the Seasons on Puget's Sound" Autumn & Winter editions; her comprehensive history of the Island, "By Canoe and Sailing Ship They Came"; and the "Dutch Book," a celebration of 100 years of Dutch on Whidbey Island, are also available.

"Daisy Woods," her two recipe books, Autumn and Winter (\$10 each), and "Canoe" (\$22) may be purchased by mail from Spindrift Publishing Co., P.O. Box 1308, Oak Harbor, WA 98277, or call 206-675-3801 for information. "De Ja Views" (\$20) and "The Dutch Book" (\$10) are available from Island Images, Inc., P.O. Box 808, Oak Harbor, WA 98277, 206-675-2844.

All Dorothy Neil's wonderful books are also on sale at local book stores.