

## THE EARLY YEARS OF NAVAL SUBMARINE BASE NEW LONDON (in Groton, Connecticut)

Groton is home to this Nation's First and Finest Naval Submarine Base: Naval Submarine Base New London. Now don't be fooled, that naming convention - giving the base the name of the city across the river - is not part of any elaborate plan reflecting the stealth of our Submarine Force. No, it can be traced back to the unique aspects of this base's history.

The suitability of New London Harbor as a possible site for an established Navy base or depot had been discussed as early as 1799. Subsequently, Naval Officers who had sailed in and out of the harbor, including Captain John Paul Jones, noted the harbor's easy access to the ocean in all seasons; its natural protection by islands fronting the Thames River estuary; its proximity to the ports of New York and Boston; and its plentiful anchorage and capacity to float ships of any draft.

But it was not until 1862, that a Naval Committee to consider the establishment of such a northeastern base was appointed by Secretary of the Navy, and Norwich, CT native, Gideon Welles. For four years, the Committee, the Navy, and Congress embroiled themselves in a political and economic "tug of war" as the two leading naval station sites - League Island, Pennsylvania and New London Harbor, Connecticut - were debated and evaluated.

In the end, Congress voted for League Island and Connecticut lost. But at the time, Congress knew little of the formidable devotion to the New London cause by John Rogers Bolles, Esquire. John Rogers Bolles was a lawyer, a farmer, a politician, a bookstore owner, and the author of two volumes of verse. But most important to this story - he was Chairman of the New London Navy Yard Committee and he was determined to have a naval installation established in Connecticut. Drawing on his legislative experience, and working with Southeastern Connecticut's U.S. Congressman, Augustus Brandegee, Bolles succeeded in having a rider attached to the Naval Appropriations Act of 1867. The rider stated in part that "the Secretary of the Navy is hereby authorized and directed to accept a deed of gift when offered by the State of Connecticut..."

Bolles then spent the better part of 1867 and the spring of 1868 coordinating acquisition of the gift. Eager to give the Navy options and with some \$15,000 in funds from the state legislature and another \$75,000 from the City of New London, Bolles led initial land purchasing efforts along both sides of the Thames River. But following a site visit

by Commodore J.P. McInstry, the land along the eastern side of the river straddling the towns of Groton and Ledyard was selected as the desired location. Boles and the Navy Yard Committee purchased parts or all of the large farms of local citizens Jonathan Colver, Solomon Perkins, and Courtland Chapman. Additionally, smaller adjoining land parcels were purchased from Frank Latham, George Anson Bailey, and Rhode Marshall.

On April 11, 1868, the Deed of Gift was signed, conveyed, and presented to Secretary of the Navy Welles. And through the foresight, hard work, and determination of John Rogers Bolles, the United States Navy had a 5,200 feet long, 700 feet wide, foothold along the flat eastern terrace of the Thames River. The site was immediately designated a Navy Yard and Commodore Timothy A. Hunt arrived and assumed command on July 10, 1868.

Then a unique aspect of SUBASE's history occurred. Commodore Hunt did not take up residence on the yard. Instead, he established his office across the river in a suite in the Central Hotel on State Street in New London. Many consider that as a result of Commodore Hunt's choice of office location some 134 years ago, the Navy Yard and its subsequent designations thereafter, have always had New London and not Groton in their name!

As buildings and piers were erected, the yard grew slowly serving as a depot for the dry-docking and "laying-up" of ships between service. The Congressional appropriations were small and the Navy had little need for the Yard, which was actually closed from 1898 to 1900 and the personnel reassigned. After this period of decline, the Yard was re-designated a Coaling Station. Activity at the Station ebbed and flowed as the installation refueled small naval ships traveling through the waters of New England.

By 1912, oil replaced coal in warships and the Station was listed for disposal in the Naval Appropriations Bill. It was only through the efforts of Representative Edwin Higgins of Norwich that the Station was saved from abandonment. But from this seeming adversity came opportunity. With the Navy's purchase of inventor John Holland's HOLLAND VI submarine in April 1900, our Submarine Force had been born.

As the key submarine builders and their yards were Connecticut based - John Holland's Electric Boat Company was in Groton and Simon Lakes' Torpedo Boat Company was in Bridgeport - it is little wonder that, in 1915, the Navy sent the monitor OZARK, serving as a tender, and four submarines to operate out of the New London Station. In 1916, the Navy designated the facility the Nation's First permanent continental submarine base and the Home of the Submarine Force was established!

