



NAVY MEDICINE IN BALBOA

A Historical Review



The California Tower & California Building, Balboa Park

BALBOA PARK

The name “Balboa” has been **synonymous with excellence in medical care** for over a century. Navy Medicine’s presence in Balboa Park began on **May 20, 1917** when it established a clinic (known as the War Dispensary) at the naval training camp on the former site of the **Panama-California Exposition**. This facility evolved from a modest 2-ward clinic into a naval hospital (May 20, 1919) and ultimately into the Naval Medical Center / Navy Medicine Readiness and Training Command (NMRTC) San Diego. Today, NMRTC San Diego is a **major training command** and supports Navy and Marine Corps readiness by **ensuring medical personnel are ready to deploy and able to provide medical support to operational Navy and Marine units, ashore and at sea.**



DID YOU KNOW?

Balboa Park owes its name to the Spanish explorer **Vasco Nunez de Balboa** (1475-1519), the first European to discover the Pacific Ocean. The legendary explorer has been the namesake or moniker of **two Navy medical facilities**--Naval Hospital / Naval Medical Center San Diego and Naval Hospital Balboa, Panama Canal Zone, which operated from 1942 to 1945.



BALBOA PATIENT CARE STATS DURING WARS

9,900+ Treated by staff at the War Dispensary Sailors (May 1917 to November 1918)

12,000+ All-time highest wartime census patients (December 27, 1944)

Estimated number of service personnel and beneficiaries served by Balboa in 1969 **1 million**

To date (June 2026), there have been **six** Navy Surgeons General and **six** Deputy Surgeons General who were prior commanding officers of Balboa. **Vice Adm. Ross McIntire** was the first medical officer to have served at Balboa before becoming Surgeon General (1938).



Balboa Park was also home to a **Hospital Corps “A” School**. From 1928 to 1933 and 1935 to 1997, thousands of Sailors learned how to become corpsmen in Balboa.

BALBOA’S PINK PALACE

- In **1922**, Naval Hospital San Diego relocated to **Inspiration Point**, a site in Balboa Park named for its sweeping views of the city.
- Due to the stucco and vibrant coloring of its Spanish Colonial Revival architecture, the new hospital was dubbed the **“Pink Palace.”**
- This iconic facility served as the home of Naval Hospital San Diego (later the Naval Regional Medical Center) through World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. It **relocated to its current location** just east of the original Balboa Park site in **1987**.



NAVY MEDICINE FAST FACTS

BALBOA MILESTONES

- **MAY 20, 1917:** War Dispensary opens in Balboa Park. The unofficial beginning of the “Balboa” nickname.
- **MAY 20, 1919:** War Dispensary is redesignated Naval Hospital San Diego.
- **AUGUST 22, 1922:** New naval hospital is commissioned on Inspiration Point (the “Pink Palace”).
- **1926:** Balboa is one of seven naval hospitals to appear on the American Medical Association (AMA) list of approved medical internships.
- **1941-1945:** More than 172,000 patients are treated.
- **DECEMBER 12, 1942:** The hospital newspaper, *The Dry Dock* is launched. It remains in publication through July 1994.
- **MAY 10, 1943:** First dependent’s care facilities are established at Balboa.
- **JULY 9, 1943:** Balboa is first authorized to use penicillin.
- **JULY 9, 1944:** First presidential visit (Franklin Roosevelt).
- **APRIL 1946:** First residency programs (orthopedic surgery and radiology).
- **1950-1953:** More than 90,000 Korean War casualties are treated.
- **FEBRUARY 8, 1955:** Balboa is designated a “chemotherapy treatment center.”
- **JANUARY 1, 1967:** Start of CHAMPUS (Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Uniformed Services) program for military dependents, retirees, and retirees’ dependents.
- **JULY 1, 1972:** Naval Hospital redesignated the Naval Regional Medical Center (NRMC) San Diego.
- **1973:** Balboa receives repatriated prisoners of war from the Vietnam conflict.
- **1982:** NRMC San Diego is redesignated the Naval Hospital San Diego.
- **JANUARY 23, 1988:** New Naval Hospital San Diego is dedicated. Facility is located adjacent to former site (Florida Canyon).
- **FEBRUARY 1993:** Naval Hospital San Diego is redesignated the Naval Medical Center San Diego.
- **FEBRUARY 1, 1994:** Start of TRICARE program at Balboa.
- **MARCH 1994:** NMC San Diego’s Fleet Hospital 6 deploys to Zagreb, Croatia becoming the first Navy unit to take part in U.N. Peacekeeping Operations during the Bosnian War.
- **1996:** The homeport of hospital ship USNS *Mercy* (T-AH-19) is moved from Oakland to San Diego. Balboa personnel staff hospital ship on missions.
- **OCTOBER 15, 2007:** The Comprehensive Combat and Complex Casualty Care (C5) department is established to manage severely wounded warriors.
- **MAY 8, 2008:** NMC San Diego is dedicated to Congressman Bob Wilson.
- **OCTOBER 1, 2019:** Navy Medicine and Readiness Command (NMRTC) San Diego is established.
- **2020:** The Maxillofacial Restoration Program is established to provide advanced reconstruction for severe jaw and facial injuries.
- **OCTOBER 1, 2023:** Announcement that future *Bethesda*-class Expeditionary Medical Ship (EMS) will be named USNS *Balboa* (T-EMS-2).

“Confucius is credited with saying, ‘If you’ve got more than ten years and you’re trying to grow trees, plant seeds.’ This hospital is where young, inexperienced doctors over several years of hard work became accomplished physicians and teachers. Some went on to become great leaders. Teaching has been an integral part of this hospital’s history. I think Confucius would be proud.”

~Vice Adm. Harold Koenig, Navy Surgeon General (1995-1998) // CO, NH San Diego (1985-1987)



BOONE DRIVE

Vice Adm. Joel T. Boone (1889-1974). Medal of Honor recipient (World War I), physician to three U.S. presidents, and fleet surgeon to Adm. William Halsey.



BRAISTED ROAD

Rear Adm. William Braisted (1864-1941). Fifteenth Navy Surgeon General (1914-1920). Led Navy Medicine during World War I.

FARENHOLT AVENUE

Rear Adm. Ammen Farenholt (1871-1956). First officer in charge of the War Dispensary. Farenholt commissioned the installation of sun dials at naval hospitals (1920s-1940s).

McINTIRE DRIVE

Vice Adm. Ross McIntire (1889-1959). Nineteenth Navy Surgeon General (1938-1946) and primary physician to President Franklin Roosevelt (1938-1945).

SPEAR DRIVE

Capt. Raymond Spear (1873-1937). CO, Naval Hospital San Diego (1925-1929).

THOMAS AVENUE

Capt. George Carroll Thomas (1881-1957). CO, Naval Hospital San Diego (1942-1943).

WIEBER AVENUE

Commodore Francis W.F. Wieber (1861-1947). CO, Naval Hospital San Diego (1922-1925).

BOB WILSON DRIVE

Representative Bob Wilson (1916-1999). Served 14 terms in Congress from California (1953-1981).