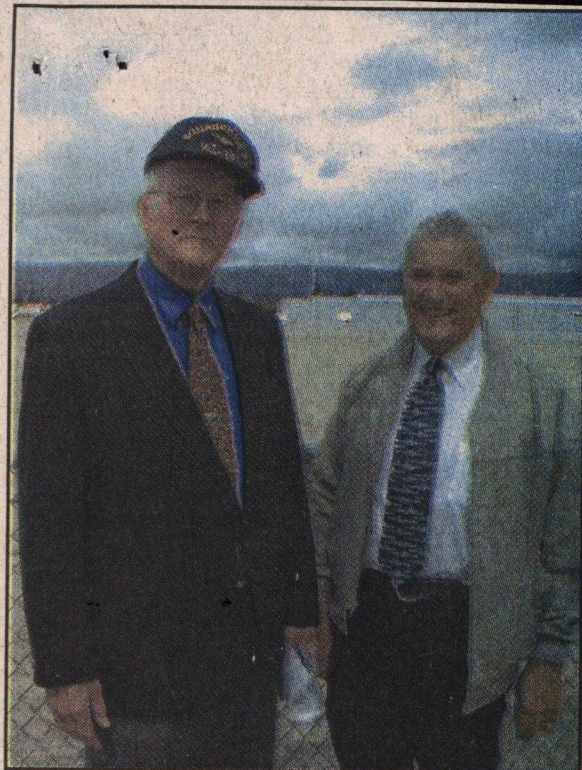


# PILOTS

From page 1



Dave Brooks/Register-Pajaronian

Pilot James Carroll and Captain Richard Ouellette at the Watsonville Airport Sunday.

## Local World War II

## pilots are honored

## Squadron formerly trained at the Watsonville Airport

By DAVE BROOKS

OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

Imagine doing barrel rolls over the Buena Vista Landfill or flying low-level bombing simulations over Pajaro Valley High. School officials might pull their hair out if planes flying out of Watsonville Airport were still performing the maneuvers they once flew during World War II.

But in their time, the naval pilots training in wartime Watsonville were considered local heroes by a city swept up in patriotism.

"Whenever we wanted to go to San Jose or Santa Cruz, we would just go stand out by the freeway and we'd be picked up in seconds," said Charlie Fox, a former machinist who once trained at the Watsonville Airport during WWII. "We'd get picked up, taken to dinner and then dropped off at just about any place we wanted to go," he said.

Fox was a member of the Squadron VC-33 fliers, a WWII outfit that trained in Watsonville from October 1944 to April 1945 at the municipal airport. Members of the squadron were honored Sunday with a plaque at the Watsonville Airport commemorating their service during WWII and the Korean War.

The pilots used Watsonville because its proximity to the Pacific Ocean allowed them to refine their antisubmarine warfare tactics.

"We had to be able to function in sea battles," said former VC-33 pilot James Carroll. "We had to come together as a team so that we could keep each other alive."

In World War II, composite squadrons (mixed aircraft) like the VC-33 were assigned to handle anti-submarine warfare and close air support of amphibious landings. The VC-33 flew F4F Wildcats and TBF Avengers.

Yet the VC-33 squadron that trained in Watsonville never saw any action in the South Pacific; the two atomic bombs dropped on Japan ended the war before they logged any air combat time. Instead the pilots spent time "island hopping," or riding carriers from one island to another, until they finally stopped on the Philippine island of Samar.

The squadron was decommissioned after the war, but then reactivated in 1949 as the United States became entangled in the Cold War.

The squadron's insignia was a steel gauntlet crushing a submarine. Initially the pilots flew TBM Avengers, but they soon transitioned to the AD Skyraider.

See PILOTS, page 2

In June 1950, VC-33 was transferred to Atlantic City with a new mission: night attack. It served in Korea for two years as a lethal after-dark fighting machine until October 1952, when the VC-33 adopted the nickname Knight Hawks and provided detachments to all carriers in the Atlantic Fleet to combat Korea.

At Sunday's ceremony, Carroll unveiled a little known fact about VC-33's mission between WWII and the Korean War. "The squadron was later given the assignment of practicing and training for dropping a nuclear weapon on the Soviet Union," Carroll said. "Every pilot knew it was a one way mission; they could never escape the blast."

Seven different squadrons have used the name "33" since the first WWII team took off, but only VS-Squadron in San Diego, a sea search and rescue group, still remains.

Few members of the original squadron are still around to share war stories, but Captain Richard Ouellette keeps their memories alive with the Squadron 33 Association. The group holds annual events for squadron members and publishes a newsletter in their honor.

For more information about the Watsonville Airport, visit [www.watsonvilleairport.com](http://www.watsonvilleairport.com).