

The administrative history of San Miguel Island: the National Park Service on San Miguel from 1963 to 2016

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ABSTRACT.—In 2013, retired Park Ranger Mike Hill proposed writing the administrative history of the National Park Service (NPS) on San Miguel Island. An administrative history is the agency history of the NPS at a particular park, or in this case, on a particular island. Toward that end, 5 of the park rangers who have served as San Miguel Island Ranger gathered on that island in November 2013, along with former Superintendent Bill Ehorn and Chief of Cultural Resources Ann Huston. They reflected on years spent on San Miguel and recorded oral history interviews about those times.

This paper traces the history of the National Park Service on San Miguel Island. A written agreement with the Navy in 1963 initiated NPS involvement in research and management on the island. That agreement opened the way for a further agreement in 1976 which placed park rangers on the island and opened the island to public visitation. Park facilities, visitor services, and resource management activities expanded over the following years. Visitor use came to an abrupt halt in 2014 when the U.S. Navy closed the island due to concerns over unexploded ordnance from practice bombing and missile tests. In 2016 the island was reopened. This paper draws upon 40 years of ranger station logbooks, oral history interviews from the 2013 San Miguel Ranger Reunion, and other NPS records.

RESUMEN.—En 2013, el ya jubilado guardaparque Mike Hill, propuso escribir la historia administrativa del Servicio de Parques Nacionales (NPS, por sus siglas en inglés) en la Isla San Miguel, que no es más que la historia del organismo del NPS en un parque en particular, en este caso, en una isla en particular. Para tal fin, cinco de los guardaparques que trabajaron como guardabosques en la isla San Miguel se reunieron en esa isla en noviembre de 2013 junto con el ex comisario Bill Ehorn y con la jefa de recursos culturales Ann Huston. Allí reflexionaron sobre los años vividos en San Miguel y relataron historias sobre aquellos tiempos, las cuales fueron debidamente grabadas.

Este artículo traza la historia del Servicio de Parques Nacionales en la Isla San Miguel. Un acuerdo por escrito con la marina (Navy), en 1963, dio inicio a la participación del NPS en la investigación y la administración de la isla, el cual sirvió de base para un nuevo acuerdo en 1976 por el cual se colocó guardaparques en la isla y se abrió la misma al público. Las instalaciones del parque, los servicios para visitantes y las actividades de administración de recursos se expandieron en los años siguientes. La visita del público se vio interrumpida abruptamente en 2014 cuando la marina cerró la isla debido a las preocupaciones por los artefactos explosivos sin detonar de las prácticas de bombardeos y de las pruebas con misiles. En 2016 la isla fue reabierta. Este artículo se basa en 40 años de registros de la estación de guardaparques, en entrevistas realizadas a los guardabosques de la isla en la reunión del año 2013, y en otros registros del NPS.

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have served as San Miguel Island Ranger gathered on that island in November 2013 along with former Superintendent Bill Ehorn and Chief of Cultural Resources Ann Huston. They reflected on years spent on San Miguel and recorded oral history interviews about those times.

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†This paper is dedicated to the late Mike Hill (b. 1948, d. 2016)—the first San Miguel ranger. We all follow in his footsteps.

THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE ON
SAN MIGUEL ISLAND FROM 1963 TO 2016

Before the Beginning

One of the first National Park Service (NPS) visits to the island was on 3 January 1937 when Superintendent John White from Cabrillo National Monument (San Diego, CA) attended the dedication of the Cabrillo Monument on San Miguel Island. His name is recorded in the guest book of the Lester Ranch House along with those of the other dignitaries present that day. (Lester 1930–1942, entry for 3 January 1937). Cabrillo National Monument itself was new to the National Park System at that time, having been transferred over from the U.S. military only 4 years earlier.

Although Channel Islands National Monument was established in 1938, it only included Anacapa and Santa Barbara Islands. San Miguel was still an active sheep ranch. Ownership of San Miguel had transferred from the U.S. Department of Commerce to the U.S. Department of the Navy in 1934 under Executive Order #6896. Anacapa and Santa Barbara had been offered to the NPS by the U.S. Lighthouse Service as surplus property, and that action became the impetus for the islands to enter the National Park System. Because San Miguel was no longer under the Department of Commerce, it was not considered for that land transfer.

NPS biologist Lowell Sumner and Soil Conservation Service biologist Richard Bond visited the island in April 1939 during an all-island tour just a year after Channel Islands National Monument was established. Sumner and Bond arrived by U.S. Coast Guard Cutter and signed the Rancho Rambouillet guest book on April 18th, although nothing else is noted there about their visit (Lester 1930–1942, entry for 18 April 1939).

At the time, the island was still an active sheep ranch, and erosion was very evident. In their 28 June 1939 report they said, “This island presents a melancholy picture of ruin and desolation.” Nevertheless, they recognized values on San Miguel and Prince Island that deserved to be protected and they encouraged measures to curb the erosion (Sumner 1939, pp. 23 and 46).

Ranching continued up until 1948 when the U.S. Navy exercised its ownership of the island, terminated the lease, and began using

the island for bombing practice and later for missile testing. In 1957, the NPS revisited San Miguel to investigate the desirability of adding it to Channel Islands National Monument. The assessment was part of the Pacific Coast Seashore Survey (NPS 1959) and was impelled by a bill introduced in Congress that year to establish a Naval Petroleum Reserve in California. (NPS 1957, p. 1). The survey led to the 1963 prospectus describing a potential Channel Islands National Park that would include San Miguel.

The prospectus noted, “The Navy Department has sought legislation to make San Miguel part of a Naval oil reserve. The Department of the Interior has not agreed that such designation is warranted, but would not seek to administer the island for park purposes until such time as it was no longer needed by the military. Meanwhile, the two Departments are working on a cooperative agreement for the protection of the island’s outstanding scientific values.” (NPS 1963). That agreement between the Navy and NPS came about in May 1963.

The Agreement

NPS involvement on San Miguel Island began in 1963 with the May 7th agreement signed by the Secretary of the Navy and the Secretary of the Interior. Involvement, however, was both brief and sporadic in those early years. Management of Channel Islands National Monument was initially under Sequoia National Park (Tulare Co., CA) and later under Cabrillo National Monument. Management finally split away from Cabrillo in 1968 when the Channel Islands National Monument established an office in Oxnard, California.

The agreement provided for several key activities on the part of the NPS:

- to conduct and supervise scientific research
- to promulgate and administer regulations for preservation
- to promote recovery or reintroduction of plants and animals

The NPS agreed to produce a report within 3 years on the resources of the island with recommendations for their protection.

Among the terms to which the Navy agreed, one of the most significant was to allow for the use of Navy transportation and facilities. Both parties agreed that Navy use

took priority and that the NPS would coordinate evacuation of Department of the Interior personnel when required for Navy activities.

Perhaps the most significant activity pursued under the agreement was the joint effort to eradicate the remaining sheep in 1967. Even after the Navy shut down the range for 24 days in 1950 to allow former island leaseholder Robert Brooks to do a final roundup, some sheep remained and continued to graze on the island. Over a 4-day period in July 1967, a ranger and 2 naval officers tracked down and shot 148 sheep (Robinson 1967).

Subsequent to the 1963 agreement, researchers conducted several resource studies under NPS direction. A particularly significant example was Charles Rozaire's archaeological survey through the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, (Los Angeles, CA). An NPS report to the Navy released in 1971 summarized results of Rozaire's work. The report was titled *The Resources of San Miguel Island with Recommendations for Future Protection and Management* and was authored by Vernon C. Betts (Betts 1971).

A New Superintendent

Some have noted that there are 3 ways a piece of land can become a part of the National Park System. The first is by executive order as when Franklin Roosevelt created Channel Islands National Monument in 1938, using his authority under the 1906 Antiquities Act with Anacapa and Santa Barbara Islands. The second way is by act of congress as when Channel Islands National Park was created in 1980. The third way is to have Bill Ehorn as superintendent. San Miguel was never part of Channel Islands National Monument, but under Ehorn's leadership in the 1970s, the island opened to the public under NPS management.

The 1963 agreement between the Navy and the NPS directed the NPS to complete an inventory of plants, animals, and cultural resources on San Miguel Island and provide management recommendations to the Navy within 3 years. The report had not been completed by the time Ehorn arrived at Channel Islands in 1974. He contacted the NPS Western Regional Office and was told by regional biologist Richard Jacot that there was no provision in the agreement for NPS funds to be used on San Miguel.

Ehorn decided to go out and see San Miguel, taking an airplane to the island and then hiking out to Point Bennett where he spent the night with Robert DeLong of the National Marine Fisheries Service. The experience of being at Point Bennett and talking with DeLong about the significance of the island left Ehorn energized to bring San Miguel under NPS management. He returned to the mainland and contacted Les Maland, the agency liaison at Naval Air Station Point Mugu (Ventura Co., CA). They discussed a new agreement that would allow the island's resources to be managed by the NPS. Maland liked the idea, and they proceeded to prepare the agreement which was signed in October 1976 (Ehorn and Lagomarsino 2003). That agreement opened the island to the public for day use. That public purpose provided the nexus for spending NPS funds on the island.

The Planning Teams

Once word got out that the NPS would manage San Miguel and allow for limited visitor use, there were major concerns among locals in Santa Barbara, California, and elsewhere. Being aware of the concerns, Superintendent Ehorn immediately selected a team comprised of local representatives and others to help formulate the policies by which San Miguel Island would be managed until such time that a new General Management Plan could be prepared for Channel Islands National Monument. The initial team included Dr. Carey Stanton, Santa Cruz Island; Dr. Ralph Philbrick, Santa Barbara Botanic Garden; Dr. Dennis Power, Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History; Dr. Starker Leopold, NOAA Marine Mammal Commission; Dr. Robert DeLong, NOAA Marine Biologist; Les Maland, U.S. Navy; and representatives from the California Department of Fish and Game. A meeting was held in the Ventura Port District Office in November 1976. The interim management team identified their concerns and developed management recommendations. The next day the team went out to San Miguel to view the resources, identify issues, and again review their recommendations.

The 2 most important recommendations were to hire a ranger to be on-island for protection and to eliminate the burros. According to a postscript in Elizabeth Lester's *The Legendary King of San Miguel*, burros had arrived



Fig. 1. The first Ranger Station tent on San Miguel Island in 1977. Left to right: Seasonal Ranger Karen Jettmar, Superintendent Bill Ehorn, Craig Johnson, and Nick Whelan.

on the island sometime after the Lester family left in 1942 (Lester 1974). The animals reproduced over time, and by 1976 there were 34 individuals. The burros caused extensive damage to the vegetation and to caliche features of the island.

In 1977 a General Management Plan process was initiated by the Denver Service Center. An interdisciplinary team visited and camped on San Miguel from 6 July to 9 July 1977, with Superintendent Bill Ehorn and Ranger Craig Johnson. The planning team included John Reynolds, Nancy Fries, Don Tiernan, Bill Koning, and Dan Schrantz. To provide resource inventory information for this plan, the NPS contracted with the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History and the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden to provide information about natural resources. The NPS similarly contracted Chambers and Associates for a cultural resources study that was authored by Lois Roberts. Those reports remain the foundational studies of natural, cultural, and historical resources on San Miguel.

The First Ranger

Mike Hill came to Channel Islands National Monument initially on 20 September 1976 as a seasonal relief ranger. He worked alternate 10-day tours between Anacapa and Santa Barbara Islands, covering for the permanent rangers who were working 20 days on and 8 days off. On 6 December 1976, he was sent to San Miguel as the first ranger.

Hill worked one tour on San Miguel that month during which he lived out of a backpack and scouted the island. On December 13th, Superintendent Bill Ehorn, Chief Ranger Mack Shaver, and Dr. Charles Douglas, joined him on San Miguel. Douglas was an NPS biologist with the Cooperative Studies Unit at University of Nevada, Las Vegas. He had been involved in burro reduction programs at Death Valley National Monument (California/Nevada) and Grand Canyon National Park (Coconino and Mohave Cos., AZ). The group spent December 14th and 15th hunting down and eliminating the burros. Charles Douglas collected data on the burros and prepared the report.



Fig. 2. Nidever Canyon Ranger Station tent in 1978. NPS Director Bill Whalen is seated in the chair.

After the hunt, Mike Hill went back to relief duties on Santa Barbara and Anacapa into January 1977. At that point, he was hired at Petrified Forest National Park (Navajo and Apache Cos., AZ) for a permanent job. He worked there until January 1978 when Ehorn called him and asked him to come back to Channel Islands as the permanent San Miguel Island ranger.

In the meantime, the park pitched a tent in the field across the trail to the west of the site of the Wool Barn and Shearing Shed at the ranch site and staffed San Miguel for the 1977 summer season. The ranger station log begins in that year with an entry by Phillip Holcomb, Park Technician (Fig. 1).

On 24 January 1978, Mike Hill returned to San Miguel as the first permanent ranger. He selected the flat area by the historic windmill in Nidever Canyon as the ranger station site. He and maintenance worker Wayne Pero established a basic helicopter landing site on

top of the ridge to the west and proceeded to build a tent platform down on the canyon floor (Fig. 2).

A frequent visitor to San Miguel in those days was Barry Schuyler aboard his sailboat *Cassandra*. Barry and his son Peter often transported researchers to the island. On 7 August 1978, Mike Hill spent the evening aboard the *Cassandra* with Barry. In the boat's logbook for that day, Barry Schuyler noted the following: "Polished off a fifth of Jack Daniels. Much good conversation about San Miguel and the Park Service." Mike had dinner aboard and spent the night. In *Cassandra's* log the next day, Barry Schuyler wrote, "We will try to find him a student assistant for the summer" (Schuyler 1971–1988, entries for 7–8 August 1978).

Barry Schuyler was a lecturer in the Environmental Studies Department at the University of California at Santa Barbara (UCSB). Barry and Mike developed an internship

where students in the environmental studies program volunteered on San Miguel. On 12 December 1978, interns Diane Morrison and Kathy Monroe came out with Mike on a helicopter out of Point Mugu. Mike spent the week orienting them to San Miguel. The interns trained to provide interpretive hikes and each conducted a project on the island. On 25 March 1979, Mike sailed out with Barry Schuyler and a second batch of interns aboard the *Cassandra*. This group included Betsy Riker, Lynn Anderson, Marty Yolken, and Lori Rafferty. Additional groups of interns followed, and staffing at the ranger station over the next few years often consisted of a pair of interns.

The projects that the interns carried out took the form of a senior thesis. Diane Morrison was one of the first interns. Her project involved observations of harbor seals near Hoffman Point. Another intern was Rick Wiles. His project was a prospectus for a trail to Harris Point. A variation of that route eventually came into existence.

In 1979, Mike Hill acquired the sailboat *Poco Loco*, a 1965 Cal 28 sloop with a 4-cylinder gas engine. The boat became his transportation to the island and served as his ranger station when he was at the island. From May 1979 to November 1980, Mike made 15 trips to San Miguel with that boat. His maiden voyage to San Miguel was on May 25th with Peter Schuyler and Cathy Cipolla as crew and traveling in company with Barry Schuyler on the *Cassandra*. Peter taught Mike the essentials of sailing the Channel Islands, and Mike began transporting researchers, interns, and park staff in his journeys to and from San Miguel. He even worked out an arrangement with Bill Ehorn such that the park would pay for his fuel costs when he had to run the boat's engine.

On 2 February 1980, the *Poco Loco* struck misfortune while returning to Ventura Harbor in heavy seas after a day sail to Anacapa. The engine failed, and Mike tried to raise the jib to sail into the harbor entrance. A wave broke over the bow, and he lost the jib while trying to tack. The boat ended up on the beach. It took 2 hours of work by park staff and the park's 42-ft vessel *Sea Ranger*, but they managed to pull the *Poco Loco* off the beach. The boat spent the next 3 months in the boatyard for repairs and was relaunched

as the *Peregrinus*, returning to the islands for the first time on Memorial Day weekend. The *Peregrinus* continued as Mike's ranger station and transportation until his final trip in November 1980, after which he transferred to Shenandoah National Park (park headquarters in Luray, VA).

Passing the Torch

The transition from one island ranger to the next was rarely a smooth or organized process. The NPS budgetary process usually ensures that a position lies vacant for awhile before a new person is hired. Rarely does someone get to meet or be trained by their predecessor (Fig. 3).

When Mike Hill left in November 1980, it was not until September 1981 that Reed McCluskey arrived as the new San Miguel Island Ranger. Reed did venture to San Miguel once during that interval. He was working for the Denver Service Center on a team preparing a General Management Plan at Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area (Los Angeles and Ventura Cos., CA) and arranged to volunteer for a tour on San Miguel with another employee from Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area. Reed had applied for the San Miguel position when it was announced, but the job initially went to Chuck Scott. Chuck spent one tour on San Miguel in June 1981 but then opted for a job on Santa Barbara Island instead. Reed was then selected for the San Miguel job and started in September 1981.

The transition from Reed McCluskey to Tom Cox in 1984 was the only actual handoff from one ranger to another. Reed had moved from San Miguel to Santa Barbara Island and was able to come back and orient Tom during his first tour in May 1984. Such was not the case when Tom Cox left for Grand Canyon National Park in May 1987. Seasonal Ranger Chris Pergiel filled in through the summer, but Rob Danno was left to his own devices to learn his way around San Miguel when he arrived on the island in late October of that year. Rob Danno did meet Tom Cox at Grand Canyon when they briefly worked there together in 1987, and it was Tom who encouraged Rob to apply for the San Miguel position (Danno 2013).

Mike Maki had worked at Channel Islands for several years before transitioning to the

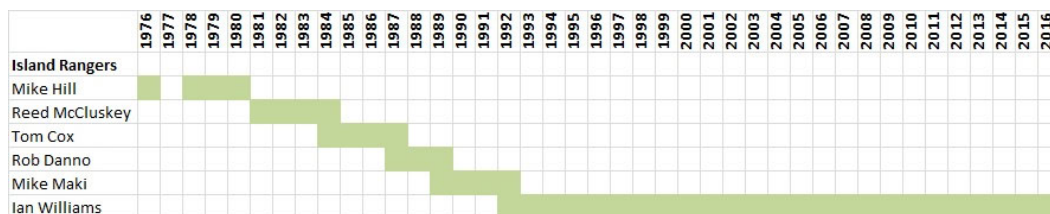


Fig. 3. Permanent National Park Service rangers assigned to the San Miguel Island Ranger position.

San Miguel position in December 1989 after Rob Danno left in April of that year. Relief Ranger Alan Fieldson filled in from April to October. Mike had the opportunity to go to San Miguel when Rob was there, so he knew more about the operation than all the other rangers who were hired from out-of-park. When Ian Williams arrived in 1992, Mike had already moved to the Santa Monica Mountains, but seasonal ranger Cliff Beaver who had worked on San Miguel with Mike Maki provided some continuity.

The ranger station logs served as the principal baton that was passed from one ranger to the next. That was of little help to Reed McCluskey, however, as Mike Hill rarely wrote in the ranger station log itself. Most of the log entries during those years had been made by UCSB interns. Most of Mike Hill's records were in his own daily log or in the logbook on his sailboat. Those records did not come back to the park until the 2013 San Miguel Ranger Reunion. Copies are now in the park archives, as well as on the island.

Likewise, only the current edition of the station log was available on the island at that time. Previous volumes of the log went into the park library at headquarters (and eventually the park archives). That situation was remedied in the early 1990s when copies of the logbooks were made for use on the island.

Some continuity was provided by other park staff who regularly worked on San Miguel through the years. Likewise, longtime researchers and park partners like Bob DeLong and Bud Antonelis from the National Marine Mammal Lab, Brent Stewart from Hubbs–Sea World Research Institute and Mark Oberman from Channel Islands Aviation (Camarillo, CA) served as repositories of institutional knowledge.

Part of the fun of becoming the San Miguel Island Ranger was discovering the island and

learning one's way around. Each new ranger, however, has been grateful for the knowledge that was recorded and passed along (Fig. 4).

Island Aviation

Getting to and from San Miguel has always been a logistical and financial challenge for the NPS. Transportation has largely influenced ranger schedules. In the early years, rangers worked 20 days on and 8 days off. In the mid-1980s, the schedule evolved to 10 days on and 4 days off. By the early 1990s the schedule had become 9 days on and 5 days off. Transportation took place once a week with rangers working 8 days on-island—typically Tuesday to Tuesday—followed by a day at headquarters.

Park boats rarely ventured as far as San Miguel. Because San Miguel was one of the few islands without a pier or landing, arriving on the island involved coming ashore in a skiff through the surf—a tenuous way to start a tour. Consequently, NPS transportation to and from San Miguel was typically by air.

AIR MUGU.—Up until the early 1990s, the NPS received air support from an H-46 *Sea Knight* helicopter squadron based at Naval Air Station Point Mugu. A primary duty for these twin-rotor aircraft was to provide search and rescue support for naval aircraft during flight exercises along the coast. The 1963 MOU between the Navy and NPS had authorized the Department of the Interior, “to utilize transportation and other facilities of the Department of the Navy.” That clause and the good relationship between Bill Ehorn and the naval command brought the H-46 squadron to the aid of park operations.

The helicopters were used for both passenger transportation and cargo transfer. Their lifting capacity enabled them to deliver heavy cargo such as building materials and water barrels. Because the H-46 had wheeled landing gear, a hard landing surface was preferred.



Fig. 4. Left to right: San Miguel Rangers Ian Williams, Mike Maki, Rob Danno, and Reed McCluskey.

To provide that on San Miguel, in 1984 the Navy delivered interlocking metal matting which was assembled by a Youth Conservation Corps crew on the flats just uphill to the west of the Nidever Canyon ranger station. That helipad remained until 1998 after the ranger station had moved out of the canyon.

As NPS transportation was secondary to Navy operations, flights were sometimes delayed or rerouted due to other activities on the Navy's schedule. It was not unheard of for a flight to take off from Point Mugu bound for San Miguel and end up on San Nicolas when the helicopter got diverted to stand by there for search and rescue (SAR) coverage during missile testing or flight operations.

Similarly, log entries regularly described NPS personnel waiting for a helicopter that never showed up or scrambling to pack up on short notice after receiving a radio call saying that a helicopter was already on its way. Log entries also describe the friendly relationship between island staff and helicopter crews. Island staff often shared baked goods with the air crews that visited the island. In October 1980, a log entry describes how a

Navy helicopter had come out to check on the weather station and dropped by the ranger station to visit. When someone described the island's "desperate beer shortage," the flight crew joked that they'd be back with beer. Sure enough, the helicopter returned that afternoon leaving 3 cases of beer and a note that read, "... and from the sky came a great bird ... called the beer bird ... bringing with it the elixir of life ... hope it heals the isolated!!!"

Flights with Air Mugu faded away in the early 1990s. The Navy's flight budget wasn't what it had been in earlier years, and eventually the squadron was reportedly transferred to Guam.

VOLUNTEER AVIATION.—One of the most unique volunteers at Channel Islands in the 1980s was Sandy Bredin, a commercial airline pilot who had a love of the islands and a Cessna 180. He filled a need for the park by flying propane and white gas to San Miguel, which Navy policy didn't allow their helicopters to carry as internal cargo. Bredin called his business Southern California Air Service and contracted with the park to fly

passengers and cargo to San Miguel. In the 1980s, Reed McCluskey also signed Bredin up as a park volunteer. Bredin on occasion would tie down his airplane and stay on the island providing volunteer relief coverage. His extended stays came to an end after some mice feasted on the plane's wiring one night.

The era of Bredin flying for the park came to an end when he was taking off with Reed McCluskey and Tom Cox after Cox's orientation tour as McCluskey's replacement as island ranger. The plane flipped in a wind gust on takeoff and ended up upside down along the runway. No one was injured by the crash, but that was the end of a tradition of philanthropic citizen air support that had dated back to George Hammond during the Lester years. Bredin subsequently made a few flights for researchers in his new Cessna 185. There is no record of NPS flights with Bredin in the log after that, but Tom Cox and others regularly referred to the airstrip as "Bredin Field" in those years.

CHANNEL ISLANDS AVIATION.—In the early years, the park used a few fixed-wing vendors, such as Santa Barbara Aviation, as well as some helicopter companies (Aspen, Rotor Aids, PHI, and Condor Aviation). But throughout the years, most NPS personnel have traveled to and from San Miguel with Channel Islands Aviation (CIA). The company had been flying to the islands since 1975. In 1975 they acquired a Britten Norman Islander (BN2A-8) in order to provide flights for GM-Delco, which was a Navy contractor on Santa Cruz Island. That aircraft (N55JA) became the mainstay of island flight operations. Although CIA has owned a few other Islanders over the years and for a while flew to San Miguel with a Cessna 337, that original Islander made the bulk of the San Miguel flights. Moreover, Mark Oberman, who made that first flight to Santa Cruz in 1975 has flown the majority of the flights. The other pilot who frequently flew for CIA in the 1980s and 1990s was Tom Driscoll. Aside from Oberman and Driscoll, most of the pilots have flown the Islander for a while and then moved on to other aircraft at other companies.

The first CIA flights to San Miguel were to the Dry Lakebed at the west end of the island, but eventually the park convinced Mark Oberman to try a landing on the abandoned

Navy airstrip by the ranch site. It was in rough condition. By April 1979, Mark said he wouldn't land on the airstrip anymore until it was smoothed out. The park soon got the Navy to bring a Kubota tractor over from Anacapa to grade the airstrip. Although it was far too small a tool for the job, the tractor did make the airstrip usable.

The lack of equipment to maintain the airstrip continued to plague flight operations throughout the years. Boots and shovels can only do so much to maintain a 1600-ft. (488-m) runway. The airstrip got its most effective maintenance in 1994 when a Marine Corps H-53 helicopter brought a surplus road grader from Santa Rosa Island. Park equipment operators Earl Whetsell and Tim Jones graded the runway with it, and the Marines came back and picked it up. Unfortunately, the winter of 1995 undid much of their work. The airstrip got some light maintenance in 1996 and 1997 when the park had a small Case Uniloader on the island for the construction of the new ranger station.

In 2006, the park moved a John Deere 755 tractor over from Anacapa and left it on San Miguel for ongoing airstrip maintenance. That tractor became the first piece of equipment assigned to the island. It was housed under a tarp for the first year. In 2007, Earl Whetsell and crew built a shed to shelter the tractor. In 2011, the John Deere came up for equipment replacement, and the park got a new Kubota B3300 to replace it. The specifications for the tractor were determined by what would fit through the door of the tractor shed and what Aspen Helicopters (Oxnard, CA) could pick up with their Bell 212.

The Evolution of the Ranger Station

THE WALL TENTS.—Whereas the ranger station in 1977 consisted merely of a tent, when Mike Hill returned in 1978, he constructed a more durable tent with a platform in the shelter of Nidever Canyon next to the old windmill. To make the site official, he put up a flagpole.

In April 1979, Mike Hill tore down the wall tent and platform, and in May the park commenced construction on a solid wood-framed tent cabin. It was 12 × 16 ft. (3.7 × 4.9 m) with plywood for the floor and walls. It had 3 plexiglass windows and a wooden door. An overhang was later added in front of the cabin (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Wood-framed tent cabin built in 1979 in Nidever Canyon.

While the tent cabins provided shelter from the wind and rain, they also provided habitat for mice. Log entries frequently recounted the saga of mice crawling around in the stove and dishes, and various schematics for mousetraps were designed and illustrated.

Accommodations were spartan, with Coleman® lanterns for light and a propane refrigerator for food preservation. What electricity there was came from solar panels and batteries. Water was collected from a spring box in the canyon or was flown in by the Navy in barrels. In 1980, two antenna poles were installed on the west wall of the canyon to improve radio communications. That year an early attempt was made at using a wind generator.

“CARGOTECTURE”.—One of the most significant improvements in island living came in 1985 when the NPS started using Conex boxes as housing. These sturdy 8 × 8 × 20-ft. (2.4 × 2.4 × 6.1-m) surplus freight containers revolutionized the sea cargo industry. They could be craned on and off of ships, trains, and trucks all the way from foreign ports to local “big-box” stores in the United States. When the park maintenance division figured out that

the containers could also be carried under a military helicopter, several found their way to the islands.

The first Conex box was delivered to Smugglers Cove, Santa Cruz Island, by a Bell 214. The load was nearly too much for that helicopter and it barely got the box ashore. Subsequently, for San Miguel, the park got support from a Marine Corps heavy lift squadron that flew an H-53 Sea Stallion. Two boxes were brought out to Cuyler Harbor on a crew boat and then picked up as a sling load and carried into place in Nidever Canyon at the site of the former tent cabin. The maintenance crew then built a deck, sheds, and a fiberglass roof over the patio.

The water system was upgraded in 1988 when the maintenance crew installed an 18-ft.-deep (5.5-m-deep) well behind the ranger station. Water was pumped to a pair of supply tanks on the side of the hill above the station. The ultimate amenity of the Conex box ranger station was a water heater and an indoor shower stall.

Later improvements over the years included roofs over the boxes based on those that the

National Marine Mammal Lab had built over their Conex boxes at Point Bennett. Concerns over hantavirus led the park to replace the carpeted deck with linoleum tiles and to seal up the patio to make the station mouse resistant.

The electrical system evolved over the years. In the early 1990s, a 12-V electrical refrigerator replaced the propane refrigerators. Powering this appliance was a challenge for the solar photovoltaic system that had been cobbled together from mismatched panels, surplus cables, and used batteries.

In 1993, maintenance foreman Steve James designed and installed a new solar array and battery system. This system was supplemented by a wind generator. Although it was still a challenge to charge the batteries enough to adequately maintain them, it was the best power system the ranger station had ever seen.

THE NEW STATION.—Although innovative in their time, the Conex boxes eventually became the scourge of NPS housing. The news byline of “rangers living in shipping crates” became an anathema to the agency. The “ranger in a box” became the poster child for the sad state of NPS housing around the country.

The plan had formerly been to replace the trailers on Santa Rosa before replacing the Conex boxes on San Miguel, but contention over where the housing area on Santa Rosa would be situated delayed the project there and advanced the construction of a new station on San Miguel. The park was provided funds to replace one ranger apartment and one 4-person bunkhouse, which were the facilities the 2 Conex boxes represented. The park managed to stretch the footprint of the building to include a relief ranger quarters and an office area. At the time the park administration had hoped to eventually have a permanent relief ranger for the island and knew it would be hard to recruit for such a position without having a housing unit for that employee. The office space was intended to provide a public contact and work area that was separate from the personal residence area.

The first of 2 island visits by the architects and management team was in the summer of 1994. They visited the ranger station in Nidever Canyon and looked at a couple of potential building sites, including the helipad and the area where the first ranger tent had been in 1977 on the west side of the trail by the site of the Wool Barn. A final site was off the south-

west corner of the runway about where the wind generator towers were eventually placed. That site was disregarded at the time when the assistant superintendent complained that they had already looked at enough sites.

Due to a couple of concerns the management team had voiced, the site across from the Wool Barn was disregarded. The ranger station that had just been built on Santa Barbara Island was felt by some to be too close to the campground. Thus there was a conscious effort on San Miguel to keep the station out of sight of the campground. Additionally, the housing site search on Santa Rosa Island had made park management extremely sensitive to the preservation of cultural landscapes, so the initial reaction on San Miguel was to avoid being in view of the ranch site. The architects therefore drew up a concept for a complex at the helipad.

That design was quickly rejected by the park because the proposed building site was even farther from the airstrip than the existing ranger station in the canyon. In discussions with the architects on the mainland, it was decided that the ranger station should be close to the airstrip for logistical reasons. Concern over cultural landscape drifted to the side. The site by the runway suddenly became the chief contender, and a design was developed for that option.

The architects were asked to design something that fit in with the island. They drew inspiration from photos of the ranch house and emulated elements of its design such as the covered porch and tower. The park asked for a roof pitch steep enough to be at an appropriate angle for solar panels.

Ironically, on both of the visits the architects made to the island, the weather was calm. Although they truly wanted to design for the environment, the architects never really saw what that environment was like. They did not anticipate the way the wind would swirl around and eddy into the porch—a phenomenon that was likely reduced at the ranch house by the fence. Similarly, they didn't anticipate the way the tower and the interlocking copper shingles would plague the station with leakage in the fog and rain.

Construction on the station started in 1996 and was completed over a period of 6 months primarily by a crew of 3 park maintenance workers (Earl Whetsell, Troy Neilan, and



Fig. 6. Mike Hill standing in front of the ranger station on 23 November 2013 during the San Miguel Ranger Reunion.

Dave Brooks). Kent Bullard joined the crew for many of the tours, particularly for the installation of the solar electric system. Bullard and Fred Rodriguez also put in the water system, which was plumbed in from the existing well in Nidever Canyon to a pair of underground tanks uphill from the new station.

The move to the new station happened on 7 February 1997. What wasn't carried up the trail from the old station was staged on the roofs of the Conex boxes where the materials were picked up as a sling load from an Aspen helicopter and hoisted up to the new site. Also moved up from the old station was the outhouse. Until the park could get permits from the county for the septic system and transpiration field, station residents used the outhouse. Once the plumbing was finally approved, the outhouse was retained for visitor use (Fig. 6).

Down at the old ranger station site, maintenance staff disassembled the sheds and patio area and stuffed the materials inside the boxes. In December 1997, the Marine Corps H-53

returned and removed the Conex boxes to Santa Rosa where the materials were burned (Fig. 7).

The Edge of the Communications World

Just as the ranger station evolved over the years, so did communications on San Miguel. As remote and isolated as San Miguel is, it was remarkable how connected one could be from the island or how marginal that connection could be.

THE RADIO.—The park's VHF radio system has always been the mainstay of communications from San Miguel. The backbone of that system was a radio repeater on Sisar Peak above Ojai, California. That repeater was supplemented in the early 1980s by one on San Nicolas Island and later by repeaters on Santa Cruz Island and Santa Ynez Peak (Santa Barbara Co., CA).

Although the repeater system was fairly reliable, the early radios were not always so reliable. On San Miguel, they were typically portable Motorola MX350 VHF radios which



Fig. 7. U.S. Marine Corps helicopter removing the Conex boxes in December 1997.

could plug into a docking station in which they could be charged and connected to an external antenna. Keeping the batteries charged was a regular issue. The antennas mounted on poles on the west side of the canyon were essential to communications from the ranger station on the canyon floor.

Between power issues with those portable radios and problems that some people had properly connecting the radios to the antenna, persons staying at the ranger station were sometimes out of radio contact. This caused consternation back at park headquarters on the mainland and sometimes resulted in the park sending a flight out to check on the “missing” person.

When the ranger station moved into the Conex boxes and the electrical system was improved, a mobile radio was installed in the station. Its higher power output and better antenna connection improved communication greatly.

There was no 24-hour dispatch service at Channel Islands until a link was established to Sequoia National Park’s Dispatch in 2011. Prior to that, island personnel depended on

other park staff on the mainland or other islands to be listening. The radio system linked the community of rangers, researchers, maintenance workers, and boat crews throughout the islands. It was used for exchanging everything from weather reports to supply orders to recipes. At 9:00 each morning, the park broadcasted the “Morning Report” which served as a roll call of the islands. Headquarters transmitted the day’s transportation, and each island reported its weather.

SANTA BARBARA MARINE OPERATOR.—The San Miguel ranger station was equipped with a VHF marine radio for communicating with visitors on boats. That marine radio was often the only direct link that island staff had to their friends and families on the mainland. Up through the mid-1990s, a commercial phone patch service operated on marine channels 25 and 86. Persons wishing to make a phone call would hail the Santa Barbara Marine Operator on whichever of those channels was free. For incoming calls, the Marine Operator would hail the party on marine channel 16 instructing them to switch to 25 or 86 for the call.

The Marine Operator was an effective backup to the park radio system and was the sole conduit between the island and the non-NPS outside world. It was also a source of entertainment in the evenings as anyone with a marine VHF radio could listen in on the telephone party line that was the marine operator channel. Calls were typically brief as the service cost about a dollar a minute in addition to standard long-distance phone fees.

THE RISE AND FALL OF CELL PHONES.—The first cell phone on San Miguel was an analog Motorola 3-W “bag phone” that was acquired around 1989. The cell phone plan only provided 30 min per month. Using the phone required taking it up to the campground where it could get a signal from the mainland. In the early 1990s, an external antenna on the roof of the Conex box made it possible to use the phone from there, although cost limited the frequency of use.

That changed in the mid-1990s when maintenance foreman Kent Bullard discovered a promotion that cell phone provider GTE in Santa Barbara was offering. It allowed customers to make unlimited calls to a selected number by dialing *FREE (*3733). The park quickly adopted that cell phone plan and set up a toll-free number to headquarters as the free phone number. Once connected to headquarters, park dispatch could conference any call to an outside line. This launched the golden age of phone service, and island staff could now make thousands of dollars of phone calls for one low monthly price.

The same bag phone was still in use in 1997 when the park moved into the new ranger station. The station had been built with phone wiring installed, and the phone was built into a wall and connected to an interface that was wired to the various rooms. Now a conventional desk phone could be plugged into a phone jack and it could operate the cell phone.

In 2008, phone companies phased out analog phone service. This marked the beginning of the end for cell phones on San Miguel. Digital phone networks didn't have the range to reach San Miguel. Initially the park switched to Nextel Communications, Inc., which Aspen Helicopters and the California Fish and Game wardens had been using successfully. Nextel's iDEN service in the 800-mHz band worked fairly reliably, but Nextel was bought by the Sprint Corpora-

tion, and around 2012 the iDEN system was phased out, which effectively ended cell phone service on San Miguel.

THE DIGITAL AGE.—The first computer to appear on San Miguel was a Zeos 386 laptop during Mike Maki's tenure. It was a remarkable innovation that allowed rangers to write reports or make database entries on the island, copy the files to a floppy disk, and then print them out on the mainland.

Computer contact with the outside world arrived in August 1994 when email reached San Miguel. At the time, Jonathan Lewis was an IT specialist who worked for the NPS Washington Office but was duty stationed at Channel Islands. He had formerly been a seasonal island ranger on San Miguel and had an appreciation for technology that would benefit the island. He came across a product by RAM Mobile Data which allowed the user to connect to email at 1200 baud using a portable wireless modem that plugged into the computer. He sent the first one to San Miguel for testing, and from the campground, one could successfully connect and use the NPS email client Lotus cc:Mail. The RAM Mobile Data modems were used until the park implemented the *FREE cell phone plan. After that, email was sent and received using the cell phone.

In 2001 the NPS changed from cc:Mail to Lotus Notes as its email client. Lotus Notes required an actual internet connection. In November 2001, park IT Specialist Ulysses Huerta came out with a contractor from StarBand and installed the first satellite-based internet connection on San Miguel. In later years, the service migrated to national contracts that the NPS had with Tachyon and later Verizon. Now one of the most remote places in the National Park System had become one of the most connected.

The Return of the Volunteers

San Miguel always had a staff of just one permanent ranger. The island ranger was a law enforcement position primarily responsible for resource and visitor protection, but also providing visitor services, carrying out maintenance projects, and working with researchers. Other permanent rangers like Nick Whelan and Don Unser frequently filled in during the early years. And throughout the years, other park staff, both rangers and biologists,

provided coverage on the island, but there was always just one law enforcement ranger in the role of island manager.

Volunteers had staffed San Miguel back in the 1970s in the days of Mike Hill's student interns, but the intern program ended shortly after Mike left. For much of the 1980s and early 1990s, the park had seasonal relief rangers like Todd Tognazzini or Donna Karolchick stationed on the island during the summers. The last seasonal ranger on San Miguel was Susan Kranz in 1995. After that, budget cuts took their toll. The Channel Islands National Park went from 11 rangers in the field during the summer of 1995 to just 6 in 1996.

Several fiscal events around the same time also reduced island staffing. One was the Ranger Careers initiative that took effect in 1994. This set the journeyman level for park rangers at the GS-9 pay grade. In those days, GS-9 pay was usually for subdistrict rangers in large parks or chief rangers in small ones. Island rangers at that point were already GS-9 positions due to the programmatic responsibilities that were involved, but there were 2 relief positions that were paid GS-7 wages.

At Channel Islands National Park, the fundamental changes resulting from the Ranger Careers initiative were a small pay increase for law enforcement locality pay and mandatory retirement at age 57. The pay grade, however, remained at GS-9. The 2 island relief ranger positions in the park were upgraded from GS-7 to GS-9. The park received funding to offset the costs associated with Ranger Careers, but Superintendent Tim Setnicka reprogrammed the money to help create a Chief of Cultural Resources position.

Another shortfall came in 1995 when NOAA withdrew the funding it had formerly provided for the park's marine patrol operation, leaving the park to assimilate those employees into other jobs. The combination of these influences and the continual erosion from flatline budgets and annually increasing costs led to the disappearance of seasonal rangers on the islands.

Starting in 1996, volunteers stepped in to fill the role of seasonal relief ranger on San Miguel. The first and most enduring of these volunteers was George Roberts who regularly worked full seasons as the island's volunteer relief ranger. When George took a paid seasonal ranger position at Sequoia National Park,

he referred former Sequoia seasonal Kevin O'Brien to San Miguel for a season as a volunteer. Also during the 1990s, Edwin Beckenbach was a regular part of the island staff, covering several tours every year while attending graduate school. He had been a regular camper on the islands, and visited frequently enough that NPS Ranger Bill Faulkner recognized him on the Island Packers boat at the end of one weekend trip and asked him if he'd like to volunteer.

The cadre of volunteers serving on San Miguel has been a fairly small and select group. Some like Inge Rose have covered several dozen tours. Others have covered a tour or two each year. To volunteer on San Miguel, one must generally be available for a week at a time and not mind getting stuck for a couple of extra days by weather. That generally cuts the talent pool down to retirees and some college students.

The Fall and Rise of the Fox

In the early 1980s, the National Park Service selected Channel Islands National Park as one of the prototype parks for the development of natural resource inventory and monitoring programs. The programs developed by these prototype parks would become models for other national park units. Channel Islands began developing the monitoring protocols in the mid-1980s. In 1993, the park received the money to implement those protocols and began monitoring the island fox in that year (among other indicator species). This was a period of rapid growth in the park, and field activity increased as the inventory and monitoring program grew.

The original fox protocol consisted of 3 grids of 49 traps each. Trapping on each grid took about a week to accomplish. In 1996, the number of foxes captured on the Dry Lakebed grid decreased. In 1997, the numbers were down on all 3 grids. By 1998, hardly any foxes were captured on the monitoring grids.

Initially, people looked for answers that might explain the low trapping success. Mouse numbers at the time were high, suggesting that maybe foxes were so well fed on mice that they weren't attracted to the traps. Another thought was that mice were co-opting the bait and reducing fox captures. Efforts were put into building better bait cups.

In the end, however, it was clear that something was happening to the foxes. The park

had funding for the monitoring program but didn't have a budget for investigating anomalies like a decline in fox captures. A grant from Canon Corporation in 1998 provided funding for some radio collars. Eight of these were deployed on San Miguel, and in a short time 6 of the foxes were dead. In the case of 4 of those, Golden Eagle predation was the likely cause of death.

A panel of fox experts and park managers met in 1999 to consider the problem and possible solutions. The decision that came out of that conference was that the safest measure would be to put about 20 foxes in pens to protect them from predation while managers worked on a solution for removing Golden Eagles from the islands.

The first 11 pens were built in the spring of 1999 near the head of the main fork of Willow Canyon in an area just east of the campground, but hidden from view. Intensive trapping efforts began to bring foxes into captivity. In the end, biologists were able to round up just 4 males and 10 females. An additional, trap-wise female remained at large for several years. She was finally brought into captivity only to be killed by the male she'd been paired with.

For the next 10 years, San Miguel was staffed 365 days a year, as someone had to be on-site to feed and tend to the foxes. The island staff increased, with 2 biological technicians working opposite tours and living in the relief ranger quarters. An additional refrigerator was brought in for fox food. Drinking water for the foxes was brought from the mainland. Dozens of food bowls were washed each day and put out to dry in front of the ranger station.

A second pen site was built to handle population expansion in 2001 at 3 locations in the vicinity of Brooks Canyon. In November 2003, a temporary structure was built next to the ranger station as a place to provide medical care to sick or injured foxes. It was dubbed the "foxpital." Bunkhouse use increased as researchers came to study fox parasites, breeding biology, and other issues.

By 2004, the population was larger than the existing 22 pens could hold. At the annual fox recovery meeting that year, the experts still would not commit to releasing foxes, but expanding the captive population further was not a viable option. The park made the deci-

sion to release 6 males and 4 females that fall. They were wildly successful and had doubled their population in the wild by spring.

The remaining foxes were released into the wild over the following 3 years. After the 2007 release, only 2 foxes remained in captivity. They were both considered too old and frail to survive if released into the wild, so they finished out their days in the pens. The last one died in 2009, almost 10 years from when she had been brought into captivity. It is estimated that she was 16 years old when she died.

From there, the focus shifted from captive population management to wild population monitoring. As the wild population increased, the annual monitoring grids were reinstated. The trapping scheme had evolved, however, and now consisted of 4 grids of 18 traps each. This arrangement took far fewer people to operate than the three 49-trap grids had taken. Effort also went into radiotelemetry, which included both additional target trapping to get enough radio collars on the air and weekly telemetry checks to detect mortalities. Fox carcasses were recovered and sent to the University of California at Davis for pathology.

The fox program was staffed throughout its existence by biologists hired on term appointments, typically for a 4-year term of service. Only a few of the "fox techs" stayed for the full 4-year term, particularly during the years of captive fox management. Washing food bowls and feeding foxes only does so much to build one's resume. Most folks were ready to move on after a couple of years of that.

The San Miguel Ranger Station saw its highest occupancy during the years of the island fox recovery project. NPS overnight stays at the ranger station hit their all-time high of 1290 in 1999. Similarly, the number of administrative flights that year was 160, topped only by 1996 and 1997 when there were additional flights connected to the construction of the ranger station.

Visitor Use on San Miguel

PRIVATE BOATERS.—The mainstay of visitor access to San Miguel has always been private boats. Even before the NPS came to San Miguel, boaters came ashore and explored in spite of such trespass being illegal. With the opening of the island to the public under the 1976 agreement, the NPS committed to the Navy that visitor access would be

controlled and managed. This management had 3 objectives: (1) to protect resources, (2) to protect visitors from unexploded ordnance, and (3) to be able to clear the island of the public on short notice if required for military operations.

Visitor access was authorized on an escorted basis. A permit system was instituted under which visitors were required to have a permit before coming ashore. The permit specified the date on which the visitor intended to arrive so the ranger could plan on being available to lead a hike. In reality, boat trips are highly dependent on weather, and boaters would often show up whenever the weather allowed and would call the ranger on the marine radio to arrange a hike.

CHARTER TRIPS.—The first group trips to San Miguel were generally organized by institutions like the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History. They would charter sport vessels like the *Condor* out of Santa Barbara and bring groups to San Miguel for a guided hike.

Another regular, but only annual, charter trip to San Miguel was the autumn visit by a cadre from the Cabrillo Marine Museum (San Pedro, CA) led by their director John Olguin to reenact Cabrillo's landing on San Miguel. Olguin carried out this pageant for 40 years. He started with permission from the Navy in the years before the NPS came to San Miguel. He continued the tradition long after his retirement. He was 89 years old on his final trip just a few months before his death on 1 January 2011.

As the park's principal concessionaire, Island Packers (Ventura, CA) provided transportation to San Miguel, offering both charter trips and individual passenger fares. Some of these trips were on Island Packers boats and others were subcontracted through other operators including sport dive boats such as the *Peace* or Truth Aquatics (Santa Barbara, CA) boats *Truth*, *Vision*, and *Conception*.

In 1998, the NPS issued a concession contract for boat service out of Santa Barbara Harbor. This contract was awarded to Truth Aquatics. Although this company started out with an ambitious trip schedule, they never succeeded in filling trips with individual fares. Instead they found their niche providing multiday liveaboard charters. Most often these were charters for Sierra Club groups. Eventually the concession contract expired, but the business continued under a Commercial Use Authorization.

CAMPERS.—One of the most significant increases in visitor use on San Miguel occurred in 1988 when a campground was established on San Miguel. This was the first time that overnight visitor stays became possible on the island. Rob Danno was the ranger who planned and built the original 3 campsites (Fig. 8). Park archaeologist Don Morris conducted the archaeological clearance for the campground, a job which also involved Don digging the hole for the outhouse.

The campground was expanded to 9 sites in 1990 by Rob's successor, Mike Maki. The park set the campground carrying capacity at 30 individuals in keeping with the requirement in the park's enabling legislation that requires the park be administered on a "low-intensity, limited-entry basis."

The introduction of camping greatly increased visitor activity for rangers on San Miguel. Whereas private boaters and group charters would come ashore for a day hike, campers were ashore for 3 or 4 days. When campers came ashore, rangers spent most of their time on those days leading hikes or making roving contacts in the campground.

Almost all campers arrived on weekend trips with Island Packers. The typical group size would normally be around 20 campers, but was often smaller. In an average year somewhere between 100 and 200 individuals would camp on San Miguel. The busiest year for the campground was in 1998 when Island Packers landed a total of 15 out of 16 scheduled camping trips for a total of 48 nights. In more typical years, only about 9 of the trips would make it to San Miguel for 20 to 30 nights of total campground use.

AIR SERVICE.—The NPS and NOAA typically ran between 80 and 100 administrative flights to the island each year. Park managers had traditionally resisted the idea of public flights to San Miguel. The remoteness of San Miguel and the challenge of getting there by boat were an intrinsic part of that island's experience.

When a new park General Management Plan was finalized in 2015, it included the introduction of commercial air service on a trial basis to the ranch airstrip on San Miguel. This service was initiated in May 2016 under a Commercial Use Authorization with Channel Islands Aviation. There were several compelling factors for beginning public flights. One is that Island Packers had reduced its trip



Fig. 8. Rob Danno was the first to use the campsite after he built it in 1988.

offerings, allowing fewer opportunities for visitors to get to San Miguel. Additionally, through the years the elephant seal population at Cuyler Harbor had increased, making it impossible to land visitors at certain times of year. Another factor was the need to find enough business for Channel Islands Aviation's BN2 Islander that they would keep that aircraft flying. Without an aircraft like that in operation, it would be nearly impossible to carry out NPS operations on San Miguel.

The Bomb Squad

San Miguel's history as a range for bombing and missile testing was well known. The sheep ranching era had ended in 1948 when the Navy revoked the lease and began using the island for bombing practice. Even in the early 1980s, island personnel would watch Navy aircraft fly over the island to bomb a target buoy that was moored off the southeast side of San Miguel.

The Navy had done an ordnance sweep in the 1960s and another just before opening the island in the 1970s. Between those cleanup operations and the sand and vegetation that

likely covered any other ordnance, such items were rarely found. Log entries occasionally mentioned flare tubes or other items that people had come across. A couple of times in the 1980s, objects were found that required investigation from a Navy Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) Team. Several of these finds were practice bombs, but one was a 250-pound general-purpose bomb that Reed McCluskey watched an EOD team blow up in August 1982 near Hoffman Point.

Many years went by without any significant ordnance finds on San Miguel. Then in early 2014, a vegetation mapping crew came across a large, suspicious-looking cylindrical metal object. The Navy was notified, and an EOD crew came out to investigate. They determined the object was not a piece of ordnance. The find, however, aroused the concern of Naval Base Commander Larry Vasquez. At the same time, the park's draft General Management Plan (GMP) was circulating for review. Captain Vasquez noticed that camping was mentioned in the GMP but had never been authorized in the MOU between the NPS and the Navy. The last update to the MOU had been in 1991. In it

the agencies agreed that since it had been 28 years since the original agreement they should start negotiating a new agreement by the end of that year. It is not recorded whether Superintendents Mack Shaver and Tim Setnicka tried to get the agreement updated. Superintendent Russell Galipeau reported that he had attempted to update the agreement between 2003 and 2014 after each change of command at Naval Base Ventura County, but that the Navy had not expressed an interest in doing so (R. Galipeau personal communication). Thus no update was ever undertaken. By 2014, the agreement, though still valid, had not been updated in 23 years.

In April 2014, Captain Vasquez declared San Miguel closed to the public due to concerns over unexploded ordnance (UXO). NPS personnel were told to leave the island. The station was locked up, and the island was abandoned. A week later, Tom McLeod from Naval Base Ventura County provided UXO safety training to park employees, and Captain Vasquez indicated that UXO-trained park staff and researchers could return to the island. The island would remain closed to the public until a UXO survey could be completed and several new agreements and plans could be developed.

A team of UXO technicians from CB&I was hired by the Navy, and they spent the month of October 2014 conducting metal detector surveys of the trails, airstrips and developed areas, as well as off-trail routes leading to various transects and points that are regularly visited by researchers. The survey involved 182 miles of track line, but still represented <1% of the island's surface. Although no live ordnance was found, several practice bombs were found and recovered. Two of these were found within a foot of the surface of the Cardwell Point trail. One practice bomb which was found off-trail still had a shotgun shell-sized spotting charge in it. In general, all parties were relieved that so few items were found and that nothing highly explosive had been discovered.

Over the next 18 months progress was slowly made checking off a series of required studies, agreements, and plans. These included an *Environmental Condition of Property Survey*, a *Land Use Control Implementation Plan*, a *Realty Agreement*, and a new *Memorandum of Understanding*. Prior to reopening the

island, new warning and closure signs had to be developed and deployed, and a permit system had to be instituted under which visitors and nongovernment personnel would be required to sign a liability waiver in order to visit the island.

During this lengthy process, Captain Vasquez left Ventura for a new command in Naples, Italy. Captain Chris Janke became the new commander of Naval Base Ventura County. In December 2015, Captain Janke visited San Miguel with Superintendent Russell Galipeau to get oriented to the island. By May 2016, the last of the required agreements was signed, and on 17 May 2016, San Miguel reopened to the public.

Facing Forward and Looking Back

As much as NPS operations and facilities evolved over the years on San Miguel, some things never changed and probably never will. Everyone who has worked on San Miguel has shared the same experience with fog and wind. There is something about the elemental wildness of San Miguel that puts one in touch with nature as it can in few other places.

The 2015 General Management Plan identified lands on the other 4 park islands as potential wilderness areas, but San Miguel was excluded as it is not owned by the Department of the Interior. Under the Wilderness Act, San Miguel is not eligible to be proposed to Congress for wilderness status. Yet in a true sense, San Miguel will always be more of a wilderness than any of the other islands.

Everyone who has worked as a ranger on San Miguel has found challenges and inspiration in the solitude that can be experienced there. There are few places even in the National Parks where a ranger might spend a day alone, let alone a week. The solitude on San Miguel is one of its unique merits. It leaves all those who experience it better connected to the island, to its past, and to the people who have come and gone before them.

A NOTE REGARDING SOURCES

This paper draws upon 40 years of ranger station logbooks (NPS 1977–2017), as well as the logs of Mike Hill (Hill 1976–1980, 1979–1980), oral history interviews (Hill 2013, Maki 2013, McCluskey 2013, Danno 2013)

from the 2013 San Miguel Ranger Reunion, and other NPS records.

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