

Brandon Lingle

Golden Elbow Reflections

Spanish architecture of rich Santa Barbara gives way to green foothills and beaches as the Amtrak Coast Starlight rides north on shoreside tracks. Outside the train's dirty windows, cattle graze carelessly on the hillsides while frazzled commuters speed south on the 101. Dark glasses hardly dim the Pacific's reflection as I gaze at the Channel Islands. I watch the half-moon backs of dolphins appear and disappear while a pelican formation floats just above the crest of a wave.

We pass the Gaviota Pier and the tracks stick to the coast as the 101 veers inland. Million-dollar homes, private beaches and offshore oil rigs spoil an otherwise pristine view. Several miles later, a lighthouse winks at me as the train enters a wall of fog. I nudge the sunglasses above my tired eyes. The 147-year old lighthouse is perched on the elbow of the Golden State. Chumash Indians called it Point Humqaq and, in the spirit of conquest, Spanish explorers renamed it Point Conception. Now, local school children use it to pinpoint their location on a map. It is said that the natural church of boulders there served as the Chumash stepping off point to the afterlife.

I feel as if the train has moved back in time. The coastline north looks untouched, and there is no sign of man. You would never guess that the train is entering a 99,000-acre western bastion called Vandenberg Air Force Base. Willing or not, nature here helps to conceal tools of space warfare at the same time as base boundaries protect 40 miles of virgin coastline from a future of outlet malls.

A strong sense of homecoming hits me. Vandenberg is a major piece in the puzzle of my life. Growing up in nearby Lompoc meant that most of the people around me had some affiliation with the base. The first in my family was Doc, my grandpa. He was an electrician at Vandenberg in the '60s, during the height of the space race. At that time, missiles pushed skyward from the base weekly, but the story I've been told and remember is that Doc sported a World War II tattoo of a hula girl on his forearm. By flexing, he could make the girl dance. When he wasn't working at the bottom of a Titan missile silo, or wiring an oil rig in the Santa Barbara Channel, he fished. He died a month after I was born and I feel I share his attraction to the ocean and the foggy chaparral of the base.

The Starlight rounds a curve and through the mist I see the distant pinnacle of Tranquillion Peak. Hundred-knot gales sometimes lash the base's tracking facility perched atop the less than tranquil mountain. A hill by most standards, at 2,159 feet it dominates the surrounding landscape. Tranq Peak is vital in the Chumash culture, but today's only reminders of native holy ground are faded cave paintings near the radar discs and mitten piles of ancient abalone shells closer to the sea.

One legend says that upon dying, Chumash souls depart the peak for their heavenly gateway at the Golden State's elbow. That path now leads to a manmade altar to the stars, but no Indian symbols adorn this monument—it is emblazoned with a massive American flag. The manmade altar is Space Launch Complex 6 and it was built to send souls to the heavens too—manned space flights.

The Amtrak rolls closer to Tranq peak where I can barely decipher an outline of the huge white building through the veil of fog. Some say that a Chumash chieftain cursed "Slick 6" when building began. Construction busted budgets and took longer than planned. The shuttle Discovery was being readied for launch there in 1986 when California's space capitol dreams, the local economy and a thousand jobs rode into the Atlantic with the Challenger. My folks decided to move to Lompoc and open a small business shortly after the economic wounds from the shuttle disaster began to scab over.

The warm interior lights of the railroad car contrast the murky clouds outside as I turn my view from "Slick 6" to the Pacific. The swells on the slate-colored sea aren't huge. Today the stretch of water seems inappropriately nicknamed the "Graveyard of the Pacific." I focus on a rough finger of land scraping the sea. Dubbed the "Devil's Jaw" by Spanish sailors, most know it as Point Honda. Seven destroyers on a high-speed run from San Francisco to San Diego plowed into these reefs in 1923. The lead destroyer's crew thought they were past Point Conception and turned east to enter the Santa Barbara Channel, but they were too far north. Frigid water, huge breakers and sharp rocks killed 23 men. The Navy blamed fog, poor navigation, and a broken radio antenna for their costliest peacetime loss.

Not much is left of these World War I relics, but some say that when the seas are big the waves are tinged red with rust. Shards of the shattered ships can still be spied at low tide. A memorial built on the cliff overlooking the wreck area is off limits to visitors. Safety officials say the eroding cliff is too dangerous. The anchor from one of the ships that used to perch there has been moved to a museum in Lompoc. The only reminder of the disaster visible from the Starlight's window is a moss-encrusted plaque on an otherwise empty cement pad that overlooks the volcanic rocks.

I watch the jagged edge of the Pacific merge into gentler dunes and

beaches. When the train stops at Surf Station, I see nothing but concrete benches and a pay phone. If somebody got off the train here with nobody to pick them up, they could be in for a long walk. This is Lompoc's nearest stop and it's the closest publicly accessible beach for the town's people. Sandwiched between the two faces of Vandenberg, Surf Beach is hardly the California paradise of fabled sunny sands. Surf fishermen in coats are easier to find than bikini-clad blondes, and the only people braving the deadly rip tides are local surfers.

Familiar smells of saltwater, tar and decaying kelp surround me when the train's doors open. A few folks got off the Starlight, but nobody came on as the beach revived memories of my first visit to Vandenberg. When I was eight, my family visited Doc's son who lived in Lompoc. After a stint in the Air Force, he landed a job with a defense contractor there in the late '60s. He worked on missiles that were launched from sites my grandpa helped build years before. Uncle Joe took us to Surf, but there weren't any kids building sand castles, as I was accustomed to. We were the only people on the gloomy strand and the onshore wind sliced through my thin hooded sweatshirt.

Uncle Joe pointed out to us a structure not far down the coast. To me it looked like a skinned skyscraper, but it was a missile gantry. Just a few months before, he'd been in the nearby control bunker when a 16-story missile exploded seconds after lift-off. Burning chunks of the Titan IV's fuel, aluminum, and multi-million dollar spy satellite showered down, sparking fires on the foothills. I remember watching replays of the accident on the news—it made a perfect mushroom cloud, if there is such a thing.

At the time, I was more concerned with picking up sand dollars, driftwood and smooth pebbles than listening to the details of why the missile fell. That night my cousins told me that after the blast, they were locked in their classrooms to avoid the resulting toxic gas cloud, which could have killed thousands had the winds been so. A decade later, while working as a freelancer for local newspapers, I photographed a number of missiles as they launched from that same site.

The train jolted and began its slow procession north. I laughed to myself upon spying hordes of endangered birds called Snowy Plovers zigzagging across the windblown dunes. On this beach, California's roving bands of strong-arm environmentalists made a stand for the three-inch tall bird. Plover lobbyists think beach visitors and their Frisbee-catching dogs might clumsily smash a nest. Legal battles have left the "public" beach virtually closed during the plover-nesting season, basically most of the year. Roaming coyotes find plovers and their eggs to be tasty meals.

A young gray whale beached itself on this strand recently during the bird's egg-laying months. Had more folks been around, perhaps the baby

whale could have been saved. Instead it died and fed scavenging animals for months. The 30-foot-long corpse could easily be seen from the air, and Vandenberg's helicopter unit used it as a landmark to practice search and rescue techniques. The whale's skeleton was spared by the tides long enough to bleach the bones white, but the chance to claim them for a museum or school was lost when the winter swell kicked up and took the baby mammal back.

While crossing the trestle over the Santa Ynez River, I look up the valley to see my hometown. The fog has lifted some, but the sky remains overcast. The gray sky spurs a recollection of childhood fears. During the death throes of the Cold War, I was terrified of earthquakes. Tremors make a low-distant growl, much like thunder, but thunderstorms are rare on the Golden State's elbow. In those days, the base didn't announce when missiles were to be sent aloft. I awoke many times in the foul hours between 1 and 4 a.m. to the rumble of a launching missile. An electrifying fear would course through my veins. But after a few seconds the sustained noise registered as a missile rather than tectonic plates liquefying under my bed. The adrenaline numbness would stay with me as I drifted back to sleep.

Later, a movie depicting nuclear war intertwined itself with fuzzy memories of pre-dawn launches to produce a new fear in my skull. It was a vision that someday I'd be walking home from school, only to see dozens of contrails slicing the sky as missiles roared toward Communist targets—then I'd only have 20 minutes before my own incineration. Like everyone in the country, at one time or another, I believed my hometown was assured to become "Ground Zero."

This paranoia combined with my 11-year old imagination, prompting me to attempt to build a bomb-shelter in the drainage ditch across the street from my house. I made a list of supplies to stash there and then began to dig. I only succeeded in breaking Dad's surplus-store entrenching tool and getting poison oak *all* over myself. I was lucky when the cheap shovel broke less than a foot into the hillside, otherwise the dirt might have caved in and crushed me. I obviously saw too many movies depicting suburbanites building backyard fallout-shelters during the '50s and '60s. Little did I realize then that nuclear Armageddon was probably the least of my parent's worries. As a parent myself now, I wish my fears could be as directly addressed as they were then.

The smell of the chalky calamine lotion lingers in my memory as the patriotic train continues north beyond the dunes of Plover country. My eyes are drawn to an outcrop of continent called Purisima Point. A wonderland of sea life thrives in the small peninsula's reefs and tide-pools. Abalone shells litter the beach here too, but these are byproducts of insatiable sea otters rather than prehistoric tribesmen. Airmen roused Lompoc's farmers

with the first intercontinental ballistic missile launch near this point in 1958. This pivotal site in the Cold War bore heavy resemblance to a steel double-wide mobile home. When launch time came, the structure rode back on tracks to reveal the Thor missile housed inside. The Thor site sits abandoned and rusting vigilantly in the fog as I watch it fade in the distance.

Next, I see a cluster of small crumbling shanties that some call the Korean Village. Vandenberg was the Army's Camp Cooke before becoming an Air Force Base and soldiers trained here before going to Korea. As a kid, my friends and I hiked around the shacks in search of rusted machine-gun shells and grenade pins. We were no doubt lucky that we didn't actually find a live grenade or landmine.

As I ponder the whereabouts of the small trinkets I found near the village, I see an abandoned Atlas missile gantry pressing defiantly into the onshore wind. It was last used in the late '80s when an ambitious company planned to launch a "revolutionary" missile from there. Officials touted the new recycled rubber based fuel as both safer and cheaper than conventional rocket propellants. When launch day arrived the engines fired up, but the missile just squatted on the pad. In time, the booster was engulfed in flames, much like a giant redwood in a forest fire.

The charred gantry is the only remaining one of three Atlas sites built in a triangle to stand guard against imminent Communist attacks. The concrete foundations of the other two sites now house horned owls and bear graffiti from peace activists who have sneaked onto the base.

These sites were home to the first missiles to ever sit alert in the United States and thereby helped welcome a generation of Klaxon horns and fall-out-shelters. In 1959, Soviet Union Premiere Nikita Khrushchev traversed these same tracks on a trip up the California coast. When he passed Vandenberg, the Atlas' gantries were rolled back. The silver missiles sat steaming, as if seconds from launch. Witnesses reported that the view rendered him speechless.

Like Khrushchev, I stare silently at the lone Atlas gantry. I remember hiking around that site and seeing Doc's initials scratched on the wall near an electrical box. The image of a man in faded coveralls and a yellow hard hat scrawling his initials during a smoke break, after an especially tricky job, burrowed into my head. The most vivid part of my vision is the hula girl swaying on his strong forearm as his callused hand scratched the letters on the wall.

The Atlas triplets sent dozens of missiles into space during their heyday. While base officials claimed to be putting weather research satellites into orbit, a constellation of spy satellites was actually being constructed. Rocket scientists painted silhouettes of rockets on the pads much like World War II pilots drew bombs on the noses of their aircraft. And just as countless air-

craft with silhouettes of dropped bombs sit in the arid sun near Tucson, Arizona, the faded markings of success are still evident above the Atlas' rusted access doors.

What I can see in all directions is a ghostly testimony to man's intrigue with space, war, and exploration. Native scrub brush and introduced ice plant is slowly overtaking the structure. Vandals have left few windows intact in the nearby administration buildings, and weather has rusted the unprotected steel.

The visible rust is its own oddity when you consider that the great solvent of our time, WD-40, was invented at this base. After 39 failed recipes, the successful solution prevented the rusting of nuclear missiles sitting alert during the war of brinkmanship. Silencing squeaky bike wheels is but a by-product of the space program's miracle water displacement formula.

The Starlight turns away from the coast and heads east toward Casmalia. To the north I see small plots of land surrounded by barbed wire signifying underground missile silos. Contractors are retrofitting one of those previously abandoned Minuteman silos for the first of four anti-missile missiles. They are the next generation of space warfare, expected to defend our country against the threat of a missile attack. One contractor said that cleaning 12 years worth of owl shit from the open hole has been the biggest challenge.

A faint but distinct chopping sound of a helicopter grabs my attention over the drone of steel wheels. I look out the window to see one of the base's Hueys hovering above a precipice called Lions Head. The green helicopter is too far away for me to decipher tail numbers, but I squint to see anyway, because my first assignment was at that helicopter unit, where I spent a year flying about California snapping photos from the open doors.

You could still sense Vietnam on the Hueys. This reality hit me at an air show when a man wearing a "Vietnam Vet" hat climbed into the helicopter and sat in the cramped alcove that once belonged to a door gunner. He took off his pin heavy hat and stayed there for almost an hour staring at the horizon, expressionless. Then he stepped out of the Huey, swung the salt-stained hat over his pony-tail and walked away, without saying a word.

During that year at Vandenberg and every visit since I've hiked and photographed the most desolate parts of the base. I'd always been drawn to the base for its natural beauty, but with age I realize these treks are an attempt to gain understanding. They are searches to learn about myself by seeing how history and today's world events have influenced the place I consider home. It still amazes me how easy it is to get lost in the serenity that transparently keeps some of America's most complex military technology.

While reflecting about the base's impact on the world and my life, the

tracks take me past the last hints of Vandenberg and I don't look back.

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