

Editors note: This article was written in January 2013 by Tom Scanlan, LtCol, USAF (ret) and is used by permission.



This is my fourth trip to Naval Air Station Key West, where we always stay in the Sigsbee RV park.

Previous visit was 7 March - 6 April, 2010. As I did once before, I asked the Campground Director for an interview, introducing myself as a member of the US Military Campgrounds and RV Parks website, and explaining that I would like to discuss the current status of the park.

On 11 January I sat down in the office of Mr. Willie Innes, NASKW Business Activity Manager for the RV Parks and the Sunset Lounge, along with the Campground Social Director Cindy Painter. Both were new to their positions since I last visited in 2010. We had a very productive meeting for almost an hour and a half, and covered a wide range of topics to the why's and why not's regarding some the regulations as well as future plans.

If you're a return visitor, you'll notice the check-in office is now in the ITT/Ticket/Fitness Center building. The former check-in building was a temporary structure, built some 20 years ago as a Child Development Center for the station, awaiting a new permanent building. The RV Check-in office was established in that building, which is now closed as is at the end of its programmed use, and will soon be demolished. Surprised that the RV Park office could be squeezed into a very small space in the ITT building, formerly a small dayroom, Willie explained that back in the days of doing all the check-in and assignment, rotation, and accounting without a new

computing system necessitated a lot more space, people and effort.

The new check-in procedure is remarkably efficient and easy. To give the guests the same kind of experience that they'd get at a first class hotel, the staff now processes guests in, collects the fees, assigns them a camping spot, and dispatches them with one of the three campground hosts to their new location. Plus, the convenience of having the Social Director right there, along with the popular ITT ticket office eliminated the geographic separation of check-in/administration and information/ITT, making the arrival experience much more enjoyable and understandable.

Long range plans are to remain at that location, unless in the future funds become available for a new, permanent RV Park office.

In the world of the US Navy, MWR facilities are funded either entirely with appropriate, budgeted funds, partially with some annual appropriate funding and augmented by fees, or, as is the case with the RV Park, funded entirely by funds derived from its operation. At NASKW, I found a distinctly new atmosphere of business professionalism throughout. By increasing efficiencies and doing all they can to keep as many campers satisfied as possible, they're able to amass a small 'profit' over expenses, which they are free to use for expansion and improvement.

A new 'welcome aboard' brochure has been written, and it delineates very clearly the rules regarding how long one must remain in dry camp status before occupying one of 89 available RV sites with full hookup facilities, at which they may remain for 14 days before either leaving entirely or rotating back to dry camp status. I saw that any and all questions regarding rotation are quickly, cheerfully and efficiently answered by the staff. The assignment to a particular full hookup site is determined strictly by placing the next scheduled camper to rotate to full status into the very slot occupied by the camper at the top of the list of existing full hookup units. Allowing for placement of active duty military on leave status to occupy available sites first, this policy eliminates any chance for people to 'game the system' to get a favorite space. Before the current manager and staff were selected, 'gaming the system' was fairly easy to do and was clearly done, as observed in my three previous visits.

Onsite washroom facilities are quite limited at NASKW compared to many other campgrounds. Management uses standards adopted by several civilian RV park associations, and feels campers have onboard toilet facilities which they should use. The permanent campground toilet facilities are for tent campers, although they may be used by anyone. In the dry camp area at

Sigsbee there are spaces for upwards of 400 camp vehicles, yet there are but two toilets and three showers in the washroom. In the full hookup area the RV park provides two shower stalls and three toilets. There is another washroom with three toilets, three showers, and three sinks, but that was built by the Navy Exchange (NEX) as an adjunct with the laundry room, as an NEX facility and not under the aegis of the RV Park! There are 68 available full hookup sites available on the main Sigsbee base, and another 21 in the dry area, where they are surrounded by numerous dry camp spaces.

At one time there were only 51 full hookup sites at Sigsbee, but the current numbers 1-19 were built by the campground staff themselves well before I first visited here. These sites are closest to the NEX laundry/toilet/shower facility. Sites numbered 20 thru 44 consist of two rows, 20-32 and 33-44; the row directly on the water is called 'Pebble Beach'. The rest of the full hookup sites in Sigsbee, to the south of the center driveway are called 'The Rockpile', and sites 45-70 are called 'Hollywood' because of all the palm trees, planted years ago in what was probably the very original campground.

Site #45 is assigned to the sole camp host in the full hookup area of the main base. The rest of the sites are assigned to those rotating into full hookup. In past years, pre Willie's current management team there were several sites in Hollywood that were assigned to what were called 'Permanent Hosts'. These folks actually managed to live - fairly permanently - at Sigsbee, rent free, in their motorhomes! There were elaborate fenced yards, outside refrigerators, spas, more than one vehicle, and in some cases no evidence that the RV itself was even towable! At one time previously I had asked about these 'Permanent Hosts', and quickly realized I was treading in territory the current administration did NOT wish me to go! Thankfully that is now a thing of the past at NASKW.

Campers will notice that here are there are hardstands mixed in with level, graded but unpaved sites. This is due to the growth of the area, and in some areas previously there was funding to do some improvements here and there, but today hardstands are not guaranteed to anyone, save for the four designated handicapped sites in the dry area and the three in the main area. All full hookup sites are clearly numbered and equipped with relatively new, clean, lit universal RV hookup stations.

Willie explained to me that once he was in office, there was more than one or two employees who were clearly not pleased at the way things were being cleaned up and buttoned down. Willie's staff now consists of nearly 100% new staff, with just one previous employee still on the team, that person being fully supportive of Willie and his key assistants!

While many RV owners coming to Sigsbee bring portable, small black water containers which they use to occasionally empty their tanks to avoid having to move back and forth to the central dump station, there is no available RV pumping service on base. There is no prohibition for a concessionaire to begin offering this service, but the Navy requires such a service to maintain a \$1,000,000 liability against injury, damage to government facilities, damage to RV's, as well as to maintain insurance which must meet environmental requirements for spillage cleanup in the event of an accident. There is just one such service on the economy in Key West, and although that company could service Sigsbee, it has declined to maintain that level of insurance. The Navy is not refusing to provide this concessionaire service; there just isn't anyone offering it.

The Sunset Lounge was badly damaged a couple of years ago by a high windstorm and is operating a reduced schedule of Thursday thru Sunday, with a slightly smaller menu than previously, and from a bar area that is surprisingly easy to sit at, and surrounded by many comfortable tables and chairs, as well as four large HD flat screen TV's. We have visited it three times in the last three weeks, and found the service fast, efficient and the food just fine! They have a great beer selection and a full bar service. Usually just one person runs the entire operation, and she is excellent.

Funds to fix up the now closed large inside dining area must come directly from the RV park; the current operation of the Sunset Lounge is showing a nice, though small profit, and there are plans to fix up and eventually reopen the entire dining room when funds accumulate to allow the construction.

The outdoor swimming pool at the Trumbo base, where the remaining dry camp spaces are, is currently closed until further notice. We have never seen this pool open, yet it now is full of water and appears very inviting! I did not do any investigating why it is so often closed, and what the problem is, but I was assured that by speaking with Willie's counterpart in the NASKW MWR office, they'd have the answer and would be glad to discuss. Time doesn't permit us to remain here much longer, so I leave that to another of the many RV'ers who come to NASKW!

For people who might be interested in volunteering as a camp house, the administration advises they are not interested in anyone becoming a more or less frequent host, but prefer to bring in a new crop of volunteers as often as possible. During rotation periods, which roughly are the months of October thru early April, there are three positions in which a camp house receives a free full hookup site. One may volunteer for a tour of less than the entire six or seven months, and should plan on NOT doing a gig as a volunteer for more than three years! Contact Cindy

Paynter for details at the campground - she interviews interested campers and answers all questions regarding volunteering.

Overall, I found there to be a very welcoming atmosphere. Cindy Paynter's group has put together numerous group activities, including a 'RV crawl' in which interested folks walk amongst those with RV's volunteering to serve their favorite beverages! The RV office as well as the bulletin board at the laundry are loaded with notices from Cindy as well as from campers wishing to enlist people for various useful activities, far too numerous to discuss in this article. There is quite literally, probably something for every camper.