

Rear Admiral William Sampson

Sampson State Park and the former Sampson Naval Station and Sampson Air Force Base were named in honor of William Thomas Sampson who was born in Palmyra, NY in 1840.

William Sampson graduated first in his class at the U.S. Naval Academy in 1861 and became a physics instructor. He served as Superintendent of the Naval Academy from 1886 to 1889. He was President of the Board of Inquiry that investigated the destruction of the *Maine* in Havana, Cuba harbor in February 1898. On March 26, 1898, he assumed command of the North Atlantic Stations, with the temporary rank of Rear Admiral.

When the United States declared war on Spain on April 21, 1898—the beginning of the so-called Spanish-American War—Rear Admiral Sampson supervised the blockade of the Havana harbor. It was his fleet that on July 3, 1898, met the Spanish fleet under Admiral Cervera as it was trying to leave the Santiago harbor. Every Spanish vessel was destroyed in a running sea battle that lasted five hours. On July 4th, Rear Admiral Sampson sent his famous message: “The Fleet under my command offers the nation as a Fourth of July present, the whole of Cervera’s Fleet.”

Rear Admiral Sampson died on May 6, 1902. He is buried in Arlington National Cemetery. It is a common practice for the U.S. Government to name a new military facility in honor of some local or area person of military distinction. That explains how the new naval training station in 1942 was named in honor of Rear Admiral William T. Sampson. As the site underwent other uses—air force base, state hospital and eventually a state park—the Sampson name has been kept. Some local folk might well have preferred that the site be named in honor of Rear Admiral Andrew Dunlap.