

In "Jan-Feb-Mar 1967" issue, the U.S. Coast Guard featured Thrun Hall in their quarterly, *The Engineering Digest*, "a publication dedicated to "...engineering information, practical technical data, and competent discussion on technical matters..."

# Thrun Hall



The construction photos above and to the right were produced for the United States Aircraft Repair & Supply Center in Elizabeth City. Robert Klein, the official photographer on base in 1967 captured the progression in May, July, and August 1967 respectively.

Thrun Hall served as the principal barracks for the U.S. Coast Guard Air Station in Elizabeth City from its construction in 1968. A circular building in form, the barracks can be best described as a "donut" due to its open central court, resembling the ancient Roman Colosseum. Consisting of approximately 83,000 square feet, the three-story barracks was designed by the Civil Engineering Division of the USCG to house 500 servicemen with a galley to eventually serve 650. In 2010, the building housed approximately 200. Occupants of Thrun Hall consisted of Aviation Technical Training Center (ATTC) students, Enlisted Permanent Party, Watchstanders, and transient personnel. When the building was constructed, it was centrally located on the base with an inlet of the Albemarle Sound to the east, the airfield to the west, and additional buildings of the air station to the north and south.



**History** On land that once encompassed the old Holowell Plantation, the U.S. Coast Guard Air Station Elizabeth City was commissioned on August 15, 1940 with four officers, 52 enlisted men, and ten aircraft. Between January 1962 and February 1965, initial administrative plans for a new housing facility ranged from a 410-man barracks to a 634-man barracks. These plans were formalized in a Ten-Year Proposed Master Plan dated December 16, 1963 as part of a larger expansion plan anticipating the absorption of both the Bermuda and Argentina Air Stations. Architectural drawings for the "500-Man Barracks" were officially completed in March 1966 by the Civil Engineering Division at the U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters in Washington, D.C. The site selected for the building was central to the two major operations halfway between the Air Station and the Aircraft Repair and Supply Center (ARSC). The construction project was awarded to the Fred C. Gardner Company of Kinston, North Carolina for \$1,793,737 in 1966. Construction began in early 1967 and, according to official U.S. Coast Guard correspondence, was "...delivered for Elizabeth City Air Base custody and maintenance on 1 October 1968."

Walter B. Jones of the Hampton Roads Virginia Pilot provided a regional perspective on the building upon its completion in article titled "Plush CG Quarters at E.C. Dedicated:"

...the Coast Guard Friday dedicated what may be the plush-est military quarters for enlisted men in the country. The building is Thrun Hall, a three story rotunda at the Coast Guard Air Station that will house and feed 500 men initially. Later it will accommodate 650. Construction of the building began in July 1966.

Indeed, the barracks were a significant improvement on the rudimentary wood-frame buildings that had served as barracks prior to the end of WWII.

Designed as a hub for efficient personnel activity, Thrun Hall provided berthing (sleeping), head (bathrooms), and mess (dining), as well as interior recreational space to servicemen of both the Air Station and the ARSC. Those in residence changed over time to eventually include students of the ARSC and the ATTC, as well as quartering servicemen of other missions and those transient or visiting. By the late 20th century much of these operations had changed and/or relocated, and no longer required the use of Thrun Hall. Although subject to minimal change over time, the retention of original architectural features, along with the high costs associated with renovating the unique building, contributed to its obsolescence and eventual replacement.



The building was named for Chief Gunner Charles Theodore Thrun (1886-1935), the first U.S. Coast Guard enlisted man to qualify as an aviator. Stationed at Cape May, New Jersey, Thrun was killed while attempting a rescue at sea.

**Architecture** Thrun Hall's unusual form and architectural expression are representative of Modern architecture's aesthetic exuberance and structural innovation of the mid-20th century. Underlying its physical bravado is the basic geometric form and the functional relationship that it represented. The building took the shape of a circle, the classic symbol of unity, which represented its original function as the general berthing/mess building central to the major operations of the base. Its architects intended the circular layout to suggest a relationship between strength and performance. With a 255' outer diameter and an inner radius of 89', the barracks rose three stories with berthing space at the upper floors resting on an arcaded breezeway that provided ventilation to the central courtyard. The unique circular design was realized with the use of applied precast concrete panels which rested on 40 concrete radial bents spaced at 9 degrees. The harmony of the circular plan was further reflected in the 4-to-3 ratio of articulated modules per structural bay between the outer facade and the inner courtyard elevation. Materials and features selected to express the design included a concrete-slab floor, precast reinforced concrete spandrel beams, curved precast concrete wall panels with sand-finished ribs, and bronze-tinted thermal insulating windows.

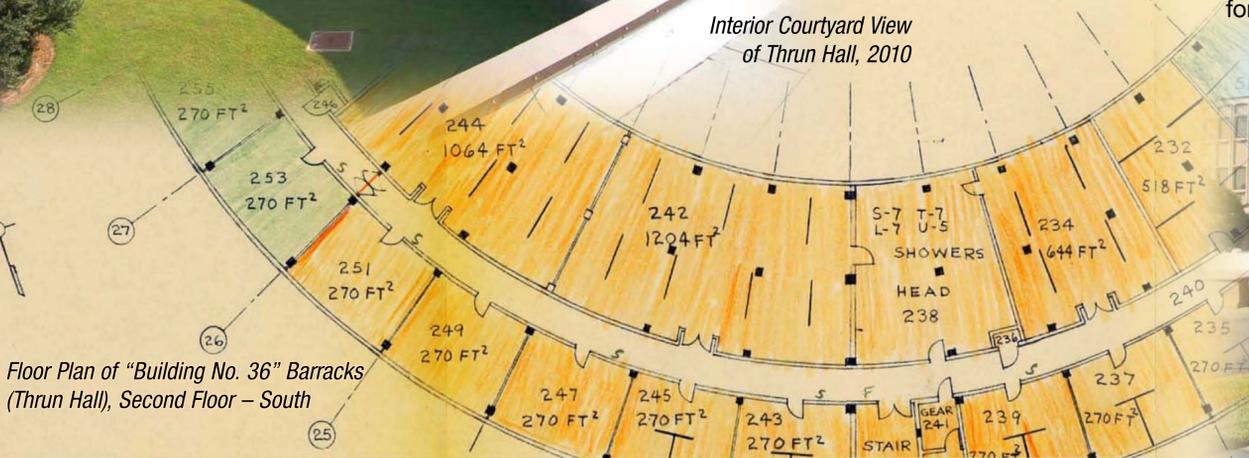


Interior hallway in the berthing portion of the building's second floor, 2010

Thrun Hall represented a unique architectural solution that successfully addressed resident housing challenges at this air station during the late 1960s. Designed within a progressive, modern architectural context of the mid-20th century, this building was considered significant because of its high level of architectural innovation. With its hollow-cylinder plan based on the purest of geometric shapes – the circle – its overall design reflected a clear and rational architectural expression which unified both form and function during its period of construction.



Interior Courtyard View of Thrun Hall, 2010



Floor Plan of "Building No. 36" Barracks (Thrun Hall), Second Floor – South



East Façade of Thrun Hall, 2010