

## Florida and the World War II Home Front

### Introduction

More military personnel trained in Florida during World War II than in any other state per square mile.<sup>1</sup> The long coastline proved invaluable to the Navy, which protected ships in the Caribbean, Gulf, and Atlantic. The clear skies, flat land, and warm weather also provided an ideal location for the Army Air Forces training.<sup>2</sup> War efforts also included shipbuilding, citrus growing, and at-home entertainment for troops. The state's Jim Crow laws brought tension and violence to military installations, while the influx of women military trainees forced Floridians to confront changing gender norms.

### Mobilization: Military and Industry

Florida held 172 military installations, many more than most states, and over one million military personnel moved to the state during the war.<sup>3</sup> To protect the state's shores and neighboring areas from German U-boat attacks, the Navy established the Gulf Sea Frontier (GSF) in early 1942 in Key West. The Navy invested over \$70 million into the city, including 32,000 acres for the Key West Naval Operating Base. More than 14,000 ships sailed through the island's harbor.<sup>4</sup> U-boats sank over a hundred ships in the GSF. The attacks decreased in late 1942 after the military enforced coastal blackouts, the Navy planted thousands of Mark VI mines in the waters, and the Allied Forces cracked the U-boats' code.



*"Monthly inspection of the Naval Photography School at NAS Pensacola" - July 29, 1944 (Credit: State Library and Archives of Florida)*

Largely forgotten today, Camp Gordon Johnston was the second-largest military installation in Florida, covering twenty miles of coast near Carrabelle. In 1942, it was selected for a major amphibious training base to practice beach landings, aerial gunnery, and airborne drops. An abandoned lumber town was even transformed into a pseudo-German village to practice street-fighting techniques. With floorless prefabricated barracks, few indoor latrines, extremes in weather, and surrounding tick- and snake-infested wilderness.<sup>5</sup> Florida's largest military installation, Camp Blanding in north-central Florida, was so big that it would have been the state's fourth-largest city.<sup>6</sup> Handling up to 75,000 trainees at one time, it held both a naval and an army compound.<sup>7</sup> The huge influx of soldiers and their families

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<sup>1</sup> In actual numbers of military personnel, only Texas and California exceeded Florida. Doris Weatherford and The Florida Commission on the Status of Women Foundation, Inc, *They Dared to Dream: Florida Women Who Shaped History* (Gainesville, FL: University of Press of Florida), 2015: 308; Ben F. Rogers, "Florida in World War II: Tourists and Citrus," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (1960): 41.

<sup>2</sup> Claire Storm, "Controlling Venereal Disease in Orlando during World War II," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 91, no. 1 (2012): 95-96.

<sup>3</sup> Weatherford, *They Dared to Dream*, 308.

<sup>4</sup> Abraham H. Gibson, "American Gibraltar: Key West During World War II," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 90, no. 4 (2012): 396.

<sup>5</sup> David J. Coles, "'Hell-By-The-Sea': Florida's Camp Gordon Johnston in World War II," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 73, no. 1 (1994): 2, 8-10.

<sup>6</sup> Weatherford, *They Dared to Dream*, 308.

<sup>7</sup> Robert D. Billinger Jr., "With the Wehrmacht in Florida: The German POW Facility at Camp Blanding, 1942-1946," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (1979): 161.

strained local resources and created a housing shortage.<sup>8</sup> Camp Blanding also temporarily housed German civilians, some of them escaped German Jews fleeing Nazi extremism, who had been living in Central America and were interned as enemy aliens. Later, the camp held 216 U-boat prisoners.<sup>9</sup>

MacDill Army Air Field, located just outside of Tampa, became headquarters for the Twelfth Air Force Combat Bomber Command that trained pilots and crews for the B-17 and B-29 fleets.<sup>10</sup> So many new pilots crashed into the ocean during exercises that their slogan was 'A Plane a Day in Tampa Bay.'<sup>11</sup> Tampa was also well known for its shipbuilding industry, including the McCloskey Company at Hooker's Point and the Tampa Shipbuilding Company (TASCO). Over the course of the war, TASCO built seventy-six ships and repaired almost 500 more, including destroyer escorts, minesweepers, ammunition and cargo carriers, and barges.<sup>12</sup>

Daytona Beach became home to the second site for basic training of the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC). Military installations were already overcrowded, and few commanders were willing to train women. However, Mary McLeod Bethune, the African American founder of Bethune-Cookman College, successfully lobbied for Daytona Beach, and the training site opened in late 1942. The WAAC recruits, who at any given time numbered 10,000, lived in a tent city and studied in the vacant hotels and businesses floundering from the reduced tourist industry. Many locals did not welcome the women to their city and some lodged complaints of sexual misconduct, but an Army investigation found these to be false. In Miami, the Embry-Riddle School of Aviation allowed women to enroll, paying tuition for courses that gave them credentials for better-paying jobs in defense plants and the military. Women students were so successful that by 1943, forty women worked at the school as instructors.<sup>13</sup>

One of Florida's biggest material contributions to the war effort was citrus fruit. The state served as the main contractor for the US military, beating competitors in California by increasing the production of jams, marmalades, and the large-scale processing of concentrated juice. In 1941, Orlando was chosen as one of three national headquarters for purchasing all produce for US Army posts, which amounted to more than \$100,000 purchased daily. Floridian citrus growers also contracted with Allies overseas. Almost the entire British supply of vitamin C came from Florida concentrates.<sup>14</sup>

### **Mobilization: Changes for Workers**

Around a million civilians moved to Florida seeking jobs in defense industries. Floods of workers arrived in Tampa seeking employment at the shipyards, coming from every trade and occupation. Skilled-labor unions allowed Latinos to join and seek high-skill positions at the shipyards, but African Americans could not. Most Black workers at the shipyards held non-unionized jobs such as cooks and janitors. Women accounted for 17% of workers at McCloskey and TASCO, twice the national average. White women were begrudgingly accepted into union membership during the duration of the war. Because of dangerous conditions and long hours, shipyards were accident-prone. Ila Graves, a former TASCO

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<sup>8</sup> Weatherford, *They Dared to Dream*, 319-320.

<sup>9</sup> Billinger Jr., "With the Wehrmacht in Florida," 66-67, 161-62.

<sup>10</sup> Gary R. Mormino, "GI Joe Meets Jim Crow: Racial Violence and Reform in World War II Florida," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 73, no. 1 (1994): 31.

<sup>11</sup> Weatherford, *They Dared to Dream*, 315.

<sup>12</sup> Stacy Lynn Tanner, "Progress and Sacrifice: Tampa Shipyard Workers in World War II," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 85, no. 4 (2007): 426.

<sup>13</sup> Weatherford, *They Dared to Dream*, 311-312.

<sup>14</sup> Ben F. Rogers, "Florida in World War II: Tourists and Citrus," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (1960): 41.

employee, remembers “witnessing horrific scenes as riveters fell to their deaths from their workspaces on the side of ships.” Transportation to and from the yards and access to housing were constant issues as well. City officials pressured homeowners to rent extra space as a patriotic duty. Housing shortages became such a crisis that condemned buildings were used to provide rooms for shipyard workers.<sup>15</sup>

The state’s agricultural industries relied on local Black labor, but the war brought opportunities for many Black workers to move away from Jim Crow conditions to factories up north. Local officials complained to the War Manpower Commission (WMC) in Washington, DC of worker shortages because of northern factories. The WMC promised that recruitment would cease during the war, but Black farm workers continued to leave. Citrus growers filled the gap with labor from Caribbean workers brought in by the federal government, POWs, and even Black school children provided courtesy of local school boards.<sup>16</sup>

### **Discrimination and Fights for Equality**

Worker home front experiences often reflected the larger racist attitudes of the Jim Crow South. A Black soldier at Camp Gordon Johnston, writing to his hometown paper to expose conditions there, explained that Black soldiers “cannot go to the church services on the camp,” and that “the service clubs are off limits for us.”<sup>17</sup> While a service club, library, and guest house were built for white soldiers, Black troops were barred from entering. One soldier complained, “Have these men not given up their homes and nice surroundings the same as other soldiers?... Are they not entitled to the same privileges as other men in the United States Army?”<sup>18</sup> In July 1945, the NAACP commissioned a special study of fifteen troubled North Florida military sites.

Black soldiers at Dale Mabry Air Field faced similar discrimination. In November 1942, a Black soldier attempted to purchase a soda from a vending machine reserved for white civilian workers. This resulted in a fight between scores of Black and white soldiers, with eight injured. In the spring of 1944, five soldiers, all northern Black men, received dishonorable discharges and long prison sentences for a supposed ‘mutiny’ at Dale Mabry Field. According to testimony, a group of Black soldiers had refused to obey orders until they were given a forum to air their grievances about racist policies and practices at Dale Mabry. The NAACP received a letter signed by “Members of the 1869th engr avn bn [engineering aviation battalion]” about racial injustices at the base. They argued that prisoners of war were receiving better treatment than Black military members.<sup>19</sup>

As more military units used Miami beaches to teach GIs how to swim, locals worried that Black soldiers might be allowed to use whites-only beaches. To alleviate racial fears, the Dade County Commission gave the Navy permission to establish a temporary beach for Black soldiers in 1941. This event drew the attention of Black residents, who began agitating to permanently desegregate beaches throughout the county. On May 9, 1945, a group of Black protesters even swam at the whites-only Baker’s Haulover Beach as an act of defiance. Historian Marvin Dunn has argued, “with this event, the civil rights movement in Dade County began, more than a decade before it did in other cities in the South.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Tanner, “Progress and Sacrifice: Tampa Shipyard Workers in World War II, 432-433, 438-443.

<sup>16</sup> Storm, “Controlling Venereal Disease in Orlando during World War II,” 96-97.

<sup>17</sup> Mormino, “GI Joe Meets Jim Crow,” 27.

<sup>18</sup> David J. Coles, “‘Hell-By-The-Sea’: Florida’s Camp Gordon Johnston in World War II,” *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 73, no. 1 (1994): 17.

<sup>19</sup> Mormino, “GI Joe Meets Jim Crow,” 26-27.

<sup>20</sup> Weatherford, *They Dared to Dream*, 326. For broader context on how segregated beaches and other recreational areas sparked early civil rights protests, see Andrew W. Kahrl and Malcolm Cammeron, [African American Outdoor Recreation Theme Study](#), National Historic Landmarks Program (2022).

## Life on the Home Front

The rapid increase in military presence created significant impacts on Florida's local populations, sometimes creating hazardous conditions. For example, Key West suffered from a lack of garbage collection, fresh drinking water, and hospitals for civilians.<sup>21</sup> Most shipyard workers remember the war years as a time of drudgery. To improve morale and dissuade workers from engaging in vice, shipyards encouraged a variety of team and club activities, such as basketball, baseball, boxing, bowling, fencing, swimming, and more.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, hoteliers in south Florida worked to draw in tourists by leveraging their all-inclusive services as a cheaper alternative for travel considering gas rations. Despite some successes, the tourism industry eventually resorted to contracting with the military, which took over forty percent of hotels throughout the state.<sup>23</sup>

Floridians also participated in the war effort through recruitment rallies, salvage drives, and victory gardens. Florida Federation of Women's Clubs raised almost \$4 million dollars in its 'Buy a Bomber' campaign and donated over 100,000 books to Camp Blanding. On Florida's west coast, the Girl Reserves gathered old pots, pans, and coat hangers to be melted down for scrap metal. Fanny Mae Ponder, president of the State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, sold over \$85,000 worth of war bonds in St. Petersburg. Men and women in the beach towns of Florida, joined the Civil Air Patrol, a non-military organization that watched for enemy planes and called themselves 'spotters.'<sup>24</sup>

## After the War

In many ways, WWII modernized the state, bringing both new people and ideologies home to Florida. The state's WWII population boom continued into the postwar years, forever changing the state's demographics. While massive layoffs occurred at the close of the war in many industries, the newly diversified economy prospered. The use of the pesticide DDT on Florida's citrus crops at the end of the war, however, had long-term negative effects on Florida's wildlife and agricultural industries.<sup>25</sup> Racial violence also continued in the aftermath of war, including what historians have argued was the largest riot in Air Force history at MacDill Field in 1946. Ongoing segregation and a lack of opportunity for Black soldiers and civilians alike helped spur future movements for civil rights and equality.<sup>26</sup>

## Places of World War II History

- **Pensacola and Escambia County:** Florida's designated World War II Heritage City, which includes the Naval Air Station Pensacola, a National Historic Landmark. NAS Pensacola trained over 28,000 Naval Aviators and enjoyed a 14 to 1 aerial combat ratio.
- **Camp Blanding:** The state's largest military installation, and one of the largest in the country, trained over 800,000 soldiers during the war and included 10,000 buildings. The camp also held POWs, including German Latin American internees and U-boat prisoners.

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<sup>21</sup> Gibson, "American Gibraltar: Key West During World War II," 419-421.

<sup>22</sup> Tanner, "Progress and Sacrifice: Tampa Shipyard Workers in World War II," 448, 452.

<sup>23</sup> Rogers, "Florida in World War II: Tourists and Citrus," 34, 35, 38.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 311.

<sup>25</sup> [Florida in World War II](#), Castillo de San Marcos, National Park Service.

<sup>26</sup> Mormino, "GI Joe Meets Jim Crow," 37.