

## North Carolina and the World War II Home Front

### Introduction

The Tar Heel State contributed to the home front war effort in several ways, especially on its coastal front. In the Outer Banks, stationed troops defended against deadly and destructive German U-boat attacks. The coastal area also included several shipyards that manufactured war vessels. Notably, North Carolina hosted the first federally funded USO establishment. While the state was home to the first Black marines and had some integrated shipyards, African American servicemen, workers, and civilians experienced ongoing discrimination and Jim Crow conditions.

### Mobilization: Military and Industry

At the onset of the war, North Carolina ranked forty-fifth out of forty-eight states in per capita income. 66 percent of the state's population was rural and over one-third of farms had no electricity. Illiteracy, poor health, and racial discrimination gave North Carolina the highest rate of draft rejections of any state during the war. However, through war-invigorated industries and defense contracts, the state modernized significantly. During the war, North Carolina expanded its military bases and constructed an additional fifty military installations. The J.A. Jones Construction Company became the state's largest and most lucrative construction company by winning multiple government contracts to build army bases, barracks, and other buildings. Overall, the U.S. Government spent \$2 billion in the state "for goods, services, construction costs, and salaries."<sup>1</sup>



*The Launching of the SS Charles Pinckney on May 10, 1942 by the North Carolina Shipbuilding Co. in Wilmington, North Carolina. Credit: Courtesy of New Hanover County Public Library*

In January 1942, German U-boats began striking and sinking both military and civilian ships along the Atlantic Coast in a devastating attack known as Operation Drumbeat. On January 18, a U-boat sank a Standard Oil tanker off Cape Hatteras, part of North Carolina's Outer Banks. By the end of January, they sank eight more Allied vessels off the state's coast. In what became known as the Battle of Torpedo Junction, the U-boats sank over 100 ships in the waters off Cape Hatteras alone between 1941 and 1942.<sup>2</sup> In response, North Carolina's Civil Air Patrol (CAP) volunteers assisted in antisubmarine patrol and stationed troops at Fort Macon helped to protect ships.<sup>3</sup>

Camp Davis in Onslow County became the nation's first Anti-Aircraft Artillery Training Center in early 1942. Women's Army Corps troops served at the camp while Women Airforce Service Pilots flew tow-target planes for gunnery practice. The nation's only Anti-Aircraft Artillery Officer Candidate School was also situated at Camp Davis, where soldiers received advanced training in radar, communications, and tactics.<sup>4</sup> The U.S. Navy designated the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill as one of only

<sup>1</sup> Julian Pleasants, *Home Front: North Carolina During World War II* (University Press of Florida, 2017), 4- 5.

<sup>2</sup> Frank A. Blazich Jr., "North Carolina's Flying Volunteers: The Civil Air Patrol in World War II, 1941-1944," *The North Carolina Historical Review* 89, no. 4 (2012): 409-410.

<sup>3</sup> Blazich Jr., "North Carolina's Flying Volunteers," 399-401. Richard Schriver Barry, "Fort Macon: Its History," *The North Carolina Historical Review* 27, no. 2 (1950): 163-177.

<sup>4</sup> "[Greetings from Camp Davis: The History of a World War II Military Base](#)," accessed on July 27, 2022.

four Navy Pre-flight School training centers in the nation. Over 18,700 young men completed their training at UNC.<sup>5</sup> Outside of Fayetteville, the military began construction to increase the capacity of Fort Bragg. Over 31,000 men worked around the clock to build roads, railway lines, and new buildings at a rate of one every 32 minutes. By August 1941, the installation consisted of more than 3,000 permanent buildings. The transformation turned Fort Bragg into one of the largest military installations in the United States: at the height of the war, the base's population reached 159,000 troops.<sup>6</sup>

One of the state's biggest contributions to the war effort came from its shipyards. At its peak, the shipbuilding industry in North Carolina employed approximately 30,000 workers. In January 1940, the Elizabeth City Shipyard received a contract to build ten 30-foot Coast Guard rescue boats. Coast Guard officials believed that the small Core Sound boats built there were better than those made by Northeastern companies. During the war, the company built thirty 110-foot subchasers, six 84-foot army rescue boats, and four tugboats.<sup>7</sup> In Wilmington, the North Carolina Shipbuilding Company produced 243 vessels from 1941 to 1946, including 126 cargo and troop transport ships, known as Liberty ships.

Like shipbuilding, the textile industry increased its productivity through defense contracts, with 70 percent of the state's textile products designated for military use. Hanes Knitting Company in Winston-Salem, Burlington Mills in Greensboro, and Cannon Mills in Kannapolis had to hire and train thousands of new employees to keep up with the military demand. Working around the clock, they produced socks, underwear, bandages, camouflage cloth, tent fabric, work clothes, and uniforms for troops.<sup>8</sup> North Carolina also became one of the nation's largest agricultural producers. Its main crops were cotton, potatoes, hay and wheat, peanuts, beef, and pork. One of its greatest sources of income came from the sale of tobacco products to the armed forces.

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

North Carolinians migrated to defense industry centers in droves. Wilmington's booming shipbuilding industry increased the city's population from almost 20,000 to nearly 100,000 by 1943. This huge influx of people strained housing, transportation, medical care, and other services. 20 to 30 percent of the city's shipyard workers were African American and a large contingent were women. Workers had segregated cafeterias and housing, but the work was integrated with many African Americans in skilled positions, a situation unheard of in many parts of the South.<sup>9</sup>

POWs provided another major source of labor. Between 1944 and 1946, the state hosted 10,000 German prisoners in eighteen camps, though most were held at Camp Sutton in Union County. Besides the prisoners' tents, the camp consisted of two mess halls, four communal bathroom buildings, a recreation hall, a music building, a canteen, a shoemakers' shop, a library, an infirmary, and a tar-paper shack for religious services. POWs passed the time in a variety of recreational activities, including ping pong, volleyball, and soccer. Prisoners formed a small camp orchestra, listened to radios, watched movies once a week in one of the camp theaters, and even covertly produced schnapps after a local peach harvest.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Pleasants, *Home Front: North Carolina During World War II*, 8-9.

<sup>6</sup> "[Boom Town: Fort Bragg During WWII](#)," U.S. Army Airborne and Special Operations Museum.

<sup>7</sup> William N. Still Jr, "Wooden Ship Construction in North Carolina in World War II," *The North Carolina Historical Review* 77, no. 1 (200): 34-35, 41-42, 46.

<sup>8</sup> Pleasants, *Home Front: North Carolina During World War II*, 6.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Robert D. Billinger, Jr., "Behind the Wire: German Prisoners of War at Camp Sutton, 1944-1946," *The North Carolina Historical Review* 61, no. 4 (1984): 481-82, 487-503.

When not engaged in leisure, Camp Sutton POWs performed maintenance work in the base warehouses or worked as tailors, mechanics, kitchen helpers, and plumbers. Other POWs worked off base doing sheet metal work at the Mecklenburg Iron Works in Charlotte, picking cotton at plantations in Unionville, or cutting trees for the manufacture of paper pulp. The gradual phasing out of POW camps at the end of the war shifted labor priorities at Camp Sutton. While some of the remaining 365 prisoners continued logging pulpwood, about 145 began working in various skilled roles at the Charlotte Quartermaster Depot. This aroused outrage among local labor unions who wanted the POWs to remain contained in farming and lumber industries.<sup>11</sup>

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

While North Carolina was home to the first Black Marines, these soldiers faced great hardships during their training at Camp Lejeune in Jacksonville. Montford Point was the segregated area of Camp Lejeune for the new Black Marines. From 1942 to 1949, the twenty thousand African American recruits who entered the Marine Corps were known as Montford Point Marines. 75 percent of recruits included “college graduates, specialized technicians, teachers, ROTC graduates, and even some army officers who had resigned their commissions in order to join the Marine Corps.” Despite over 12,000 serving overseas it was not until November 10, 1945 that Frederick Clinton Branch from Hamlet, North Carolina became the first African American commissioned officer in the United States Marine Corps.<sup>12</sup>

Black Marines remember their facilities at Montford Point being far inferior to those in the white section of Camp Lejeune. Henry Baul recounted that they slept in huts that “looked like they were made out of cardboard,” while white Marines had barracks made of brick. Montford Point Marines were not allowed to be in other areas of Camp Lejeune without a white Marine chaperoning them. As historian Judson L. Jeffries notes, “Montford Pointers repeatedly endured racial slurs and experienced severe physical duress.” It was clear to most Black North Carolinians that racial discrimination at home needed to change. Louis Austin at the *Carolina Times* was one of the most outspoken Southern Black editors to champion the Double V strategy in North Carolina. In March 1944, he called for the firing of Secretary of War Henry Stimson after Stimson argued that Black troops were “unable to master efficiently the techniques of modern war weapons.” Austin’s unflinching and forthright rebuke against racism in the military bolstered support for civil rights initiatives across North Carolina.<sup>13</sup>

Throughout the war, there were many reports of Black challenges to segregated bus seating. The chairman of the North Carolina Utilities Commission warned Governor J. Melville Broughton that he was receiving many complaints from whites “that the Negroes crowd them off the buses.” The chairman argued that the situation was worst in Durham because “there are a great many Northern negro soldiers at Camp Butner.” Despite the chairman’s argument, it wasn’t only Black soldiers resisting Jim Crow: in the spring of 1943, a sixteen-year-old student was arrested after she refused to sit in the back of a Durham bus. Another Black woman was arrested and beaten by two white police officers after sitting in the front of a Wilmington bus that June.

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<sup>11</sup> Billinger, Jr., “Behind the Wire,” 493-497, 500.

<sup>12</sup> Judson L. Jeffries, “The Marine Corps’ First Black Commissioned Officer: The Life and Legacy of Frederick C. Branch,” *The North Carolina Historical Review* 87, no. 4 (2010): 379, 382, 386-387.

<sup>13</sup> Jerry Gershenson, “Double V in North Carolina: The Struggle for Racial Equality during World War II” in *Louis Austin and the Carolina Times: A Life in the Long Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018): 60-62.

## Life on the Home Front

Life on North Carolina's home front was profoundly affected by the arrival of thousands of soldiers from around the United States. The myriad changes produced, historian Cliff Tyndall argues, "awkward and confusing situations regarding women, race relations, and sectionalism."<sup>14</sup> Despite these challenging situations, many spent their time in donation and volunteer efforts. In Wilmington, the US Post Office on N. Front Street hosted war bond drives and rallies, while volunteers charted air movements in the basement as part of the Civil Air Patrol. New Hanover County raised \$40 million in seven war bond drives. However, many of these patriotic activities remained strictly segregated.

North Carolina's Fort Bragg holds the honor of building the first United Service Organizations (USO) clubhouse in late 1941 to support military personnel, their families, and defense workers through welfare and recreational activities. While other local organizations had begun supporting and entertaining troops, this was the first federally funded, permanently built USO location in the country.<sup>15</sup> In all, the state was home to official USO clubs in nineteen cities. While some USOs were segregated, others explicitly hosted African American soldiers, such as the Seabrook Road USO in Fayetteville. Their membership records indicate an intentional mission to bring "better relationship and cooperation for harmonious working regardless of race, creed, or color."<sup>16</sup>

## After the War

World War II's dramatic impact on North Carolina's economy had lasting effects, especially in terms of industrialization and jobs. Higher education benefitted greatly from the GI Bill and new facilities that had been originally built to serve military education and training. While the war offered increased opportunities for African Americans, it also spotlighted racial discrimination and violence that directly shaped local civil rights activism after the war. In 2012, the Montford Point Marines received the Congressional Gold Medal for their role in breaking racial barriers in the military.<sup>17</sup> The sinking of so many ships off the coast of Cape Hatteras released oil and hazardous materials that continue to wash up on the state's shores, but the sunken ships have also become significant artificial reefs.<sup>18</sup>

## Places of World War II History

- **Wilmington:** Holding the distinction of being the nation's first designated World War II Heritage City, Wilmington was home to the North Carolina Shipbuilding Company that specialized in Liberty ships. The city was also notable for its vibrant USO scene catering to servicemen stationed at nearby military bases. You can visit the [Cape Fear Museum](#) to learn more today.
- **Camp Lejeune:** Established in 1941, this premier amphibious base trained thousands of Marines, including the first African American recruits at Montford Point, a segregated portion of the camp.

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<sup>14</sup> "Greetings from Camp Davis: The History of a World War II Military Base."

<sup>15</sup> Paul X. Rutz, "[Here's How the First USO Centers Were Created](#)," United Services Organization, February 24, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> North Carolina USO Clubs Records, WWII 6, WWII Papers, Military Collection, State Archives of North Carolina, Raleigh, N.C.

<sup>17</sup> "[Montford Point Marines Awarded Congressional Gold Medal](#)," United States Mint, June 27, 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Sam Walker, "[Two Relics Surface from Battle of the Atlantic](#)," CoastalReview.org, July 20, 2017; Shannon Ricles, "[The Underwater World of Living Shipwrecks](#)," National Marine Sanctuaries, November 2020.