

The Spanish River Papers

FALL 1985

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WORLD WAR II IN BOCA RATON: THE HOME FRONT

by
Drollene P. Brown

DATELINE CHICAGO, 1942. Those wealthy Chicagoans who are members of the fabulous Boca Raton Club in Florida will not have a chance to spend vacations there next winter, for the entire east coast resort, including the club, has been taken over by the army. Construction of an air corps radio [sic] technical training school has been started, and already many officers and their families have moved to Boca Raton (Cass).

The brief newspaper piece by Judith Cass can be found in a scrapbook donated to the Boca Raton Historical Society archives by Lt. Col. Frank F. Fisher. Originally from La Grange, Illinois, Fisher served in Boca Raton during World War II. The article continues with a description of the club and the town.

The club is one of the most beautiful in this country, having been built by the late Addison Mizner during the Florida land boom. No expense was spared to make the Spanish colonial buildings and surrounding gardens and two golf courses show places, and the beach club is one of the most established in the state. Boca Raton itself has only a municipal building, two general stores, two gas stations, a roadside restaurant, and a tavern



OLD TOWN HALL,
HOME OF THE BOCA RATON HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Jeanne Nixon Baur, Artist

A report to the membership of
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with a year around population of 500. . . . (Cass)

There may have been despair over such a wartime deprivation among the wealthy of Chicago and other cities, but Boca Raton Mayor J.C. Mitchell and his cohorts couldn't have been more pleased.

Mr. Mitchell Goes to Washington

When Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, Joe Mitchell, a six-year veteran of World War I, saw the possibilities for service in Boca Raton. His knowledge of real estate led him to believe that a military base here would be beneficial for the city as well as the nation. Jackie Ashton Waldeck, in **Boca Raton: A Romance of the Past**, asserts that Mitchell was a "national leader." He had no trouble convincing the city council to support his ideas. They agreed that he should go to Washington to present his proposal (Waldeck, 117).

In Washington, Mitchell joined a crowd of counterparts, all trying to obtain military posts for their own cities. The War Department sent him to the Navy, which passed him on to the Army Air Corps. At last, he was given a hearing, and the mayor was promised that someone would come down to take a look (Waldeck, 118).

General "Hap" Arnold and other officers came to Florida seeking a site for an air base where men would be trained in a new technique called radar (Waldeck, 118). The Air Corps Technical School for Radar had been established in late 1941 at Scott Field, Illinois, but it needed a permanent station of its own. Space at Scott was limited. The school needed to be near the water so that shipping lanes could provide targets for daily contact by radar (Archives).

Sites in the Great Lakes had been considered, but they were rejected because

shipping came to a halt during the winter months when the lake was frozen. It was decided that advantage should be taken of the east coast of Florida, where shipping traffic was heavy throughout the year. Moreover, Florida had ideal flying weather--fog free, with a moderate temperature (Archive).

There was one final consideration. A Signal Corps radar school had been established twenty-five miles north of West Palm Beach--Camp Hobe Sound. Army officials felt it desirable to have the two schools near each other (Archives).

And the Winner Is. . .

Three sites in Florida were considered. Vero Beach was eliminated because the Navy was interested there. Fort Pierce was ruled out for engineering reasons (Archives). When General Arnold and his delegation arrived in Boca Raton, "there had been a tropical deluge and the streets and airport were standing in six inches of water." The storm had bypassed the town, however, and "high land to the west was dry" (Waldeck, 118).

The officers decided to look no further. The winner: Boca Raton.

Boca Raton may have been the winner, but there were some people living on the "high land to the west" who didn't feel much like winners. The base's boundaries were described by the Florida East Coast and Seaboard tracks, Palmetto Park Road and Fifty-first Street. A lot of people resisted being moved from their land, and some didn't feel that they were treated fairly by federal officials.

A terse newspaper article in 1942 stated the legalities:

The first emergency condemnation proceeding under the "second war purposes act" which allows immediate



taking of land without an appraisal and before compensation is determined, was filed in Federal Court here Saturday by Stuart W. Patton, special attorney, lands division, U.S. department of justice, with offices in the Dupont building.

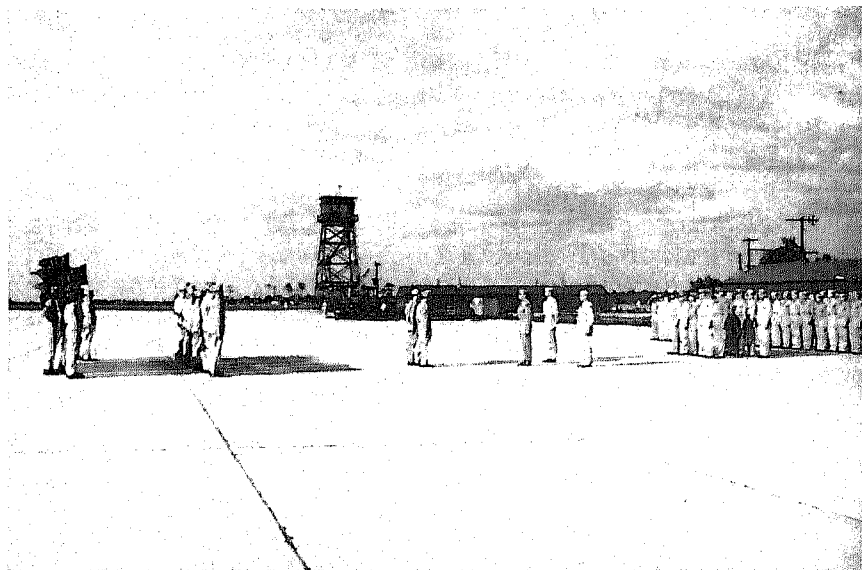
The action takes over 5,820 acres of land at Boca Raton, Palm Beach County, for the Army Air Corps technical training station. Of thirty property owners, four are Japanese farmers.

Negotiation for fair price will follow with owners, Patton said, and if agreement cannot be reached an appraisal will have to be made to establish just compensation (Archives).

Obviously, "just compensation" is a relative term. Waldeck recounts the loss felt by three families:

For Perry and Florence Purdom, having to give up their house was a major blow. After years of incredibly hard toil, they had at last, during the twenties, acquired their own home. This was the only property they owned but because it was wartime, they accepted the Army's ruling and found a place to live just a few blocks away. . . .

For [Burt B.] Raulerson, who was a prosperous farmer, the economic loss was not so severe as for the Purdoms, but with the shortage of housing in Boca Raton, he could not find a place to live. He was forced to move back to Seville where he owned an orange grove. Thus departed one of the town's first pioneer families, never to return.



Another piece of property taken over by the military was the building west of the FEC railroad tracks where the Louis A. Zimmerman family had lived and had a restaurant before starting ZIM's on Federal. "My father was paid \$2,500 for the two-story nine-room building," said Lucille [Zimmerman Morris]. "After the war, he was given the chance to buy it back for \$6,000, but he refused" (Waldeck, p. 121).

The reason the price for Zimmerman's property in 1942 was so low, according to the appraisers, was that it was a frame building and not sturdy. But that little stucco building stood until it was destroyed by its owners in September 1985. It had withstood the wrath of the 1926 and 1928 hurricanes (Archives). Ironically, it had also remained after the 1947 hurricane, when many military buildings were blown flat, and radar antennae were hurled halfway to the Everglades, thus hastening the base's planned relocation to Minnesota (Mays).

An Air Base Is Born

Before the military took over, there were more residents than owners on the chosen land. In addition to fifty-one white and Japanese families who were "legal" residents--there was a black community of forty families living in houses and shanties built over a period of fifteen years (Archives). BRHS archivist Peggy McCall surmises that these homes were probably in the "Moon Hill" area--around Fortieth Street, east of NW Fifth Avenue. The land hadn't been obtained by legal channels, but through the time-honored custom of squatters' rights.

By May of 1942, however, the government had acquired its acreage. With wartime speed, the engineers set to work. In June, Col. A. MacSpadden was ordered to expedite the construction of America's first airborne radar school at Boca Raton. According to MacSpadden in an interview for a Fort Lauderdale newspaper in 1961, the installation at first was intended to be a temporary post to serve as a twin base to the Army Signal Corps Station seventy miles away at Camp Hobe Sound. He took 3500 construction workers and eleven million dollars and threw up the Boca Raton installation in four months. Construction was easy, said the colonel, because the people were friendly and cooperative (Kelly).

Of fourteen principal contractors, twelve came from Florida, mostly from Palm Beach, Miami, and St. Petersburg. A few troops occupied the field in the latter part of August of 1942, but the field didn't officially open until October 15, 1942. The base reached 16,381 troops by early 1945 (Archives).

Since Boca Raton was the Army Air Force's only radar training station during World War II, the school offered several types of training, including courses for operators, mechanics, and electronics officers (Archives).

One notable exception to the base's western site was the Boca Raton Hotel. While young cadets began to move in for their speeded up program in radar and electronics, acting manager Harold Turner busily stored furniture and placed coverings on pillars, to protect carved plaster from the guns of servicemen hurrying down the halls. "Soldiers practiced maneuvers and dug fox-holes in the golf course" (Waldeck, p. 120).

According to the 1947 Army Air Forces Training Command Year Book donated to the BRHS archives by Captain A.J. Mills:

Shortages of equipment and trained personnel plagued the school in its early days. For example, until January 1943, only ten pilots were available to fly dilapidated English Judson patrol bombers on training missions, and often fatigued pilots would compensate for the shortage of crew members and mechanics. The school operated literally "on a wing and a prayer" (Archives).

The Home Front

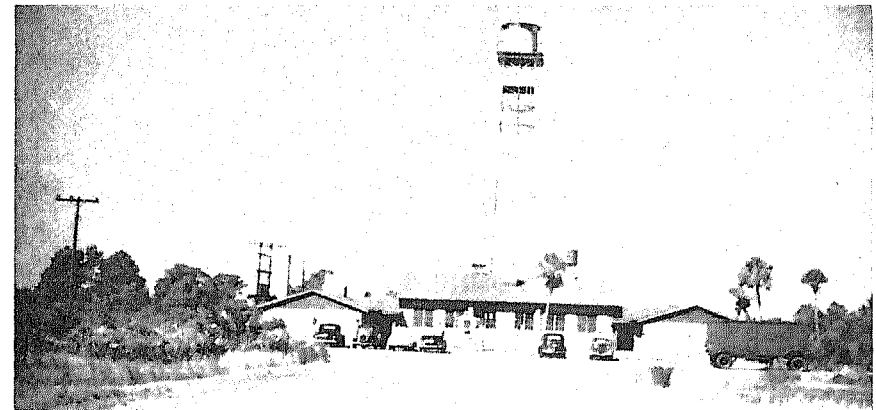
To most people in the United States, the war was "over there." But for citizens of eastern coastal cities, the conflict was closer. Like other parents across the nation, Boca Ratonians sent their children to war, but those who remained behind found themselves very close to some of the belligerency.

A letter dated May 10, 1942, from Tom Rickards to his sister Kate, shows the surprise and horror that many residents felt. The letter begins:

Had direct contact yesterday with horrors of sub warfare. Was awakened about 4:30 by several heavy detonations, which I later learned was exploding of ammunition aboard stricken ship as she burned (Archives).

The ship was the Lubrafol, a large north-bound tanker, loaded with fuel oil. All of her crew of fifty burned to death. The blazing tanker drifted northward with the Gulf Stream, and even at noon the smoke could be seen off Jupiter.

Seven Lubrafol crew members were wearing life preservers, so their bodies



floated. They were taken to the Coast Guard Station at Boca Inlet. Rickards, in his capacity as a Justice of the Peace, helped with identification. The experience left him quite shaken.

In the May 10 letter, after expressing his distress, Rickards went on to report other attacks.

They say at least twelve tankers have been torpedoed between Ft. Pierce and Miami during last week. I know of one last Monday off Boynton which was attacked in broad daylight, about 1:00, by a sub which was between it and shore (Archives).

On May 14, Tom Rickards, Jr. wrote on the same subject to his Aunt Kate:

The war continues to come closer. The ship sinkings off our coast--in sight of land--are enough to make you sick at your stomach. I just went up on the roof of our building [office in West Palm Beach] to watch a tanker burning only two miles from shore--a huge pillar of smoke reaching probably a mile in the sky. That is the second ship in the late week I have watched burn. . . . There have been a great many more, some of which have been seen by people in swimming on the beach. One only a few hundred yards from Lake Worth Casino sank in two minutes (Archives).

Rickards, Jr. was waiting at that time for orders from the army. He must have found it incredible that the war had come to him, before he could go to the war. He continued in his letter:

So as I said, the war is coming closer and closer all the time now. We are on an almost complete black-

out every night now. No cars are allowed to move faster than twenty miles per hour and then only with dim parking lights. No street lights, show windows, flood lights, night baseball, or anything. It's an eerie sight. And bombers are overhead all the time (Archives).

The Germans were a pervasive presence. Major James J. Weldon, interviewed in 1965, recalled that "German submarines patrolled the whole coast from Jacksonville to Pompano Beach ("Army Man . . .").

One sub was sunk off the coast of Boca Raton, according to Hollywood plumber Joe Lankford, who was a shipfitter for the U.S. Navy patrol boat that sank the sub. According to a recent newspaper article, Lankford remembers well his "being on board an over-sized submarine chaser that sank the sub that day. Lankford's boat didn't get the first shot at the sub because a Navy bomber also responded to the alert" (Mills).

The Navy plane had one big bomb, which it dropped. It brought up only contaminated oil. Subs under attack often emptied their bilges of dirty oil to give the impression that they had been hit. Lankford stood on the flying bridge with the captain, and he heard the orders to bomb the U-boat.

Two charges were dropped off the stern and two more left the sides of the boat. When clean oil rose to the surface, . . . the 70-man crew of the 184-foot PC483 knew the sub's fuel tanks had ruptured.

"The beach was black with people watching us drop those charges," Lankford said. "The whole beach would shake (Mills)."

Through the months, spectators on the beach saw U-boats attacking as well as being attacked. Max Hutkin, owner of Boca Raton's first "supermarket," told a reporter in 1980 that he remembered hearing an explosion one day. He and his customers piled into a car and rushed to the beach. With the naked eye, they could see a German sub sinking cargo ships (Gordon).

In a speech to the Rotary Club in 1976, Hutkin recalled another time, when a German sub was captured. A tremor must have run through the community when it was discovered that the sub had been stocked with local groceries (Archives).

Yes, there were infiltrators. Major Weldon noted that there "was a whole school of spies operating out of Pompano Beach. We caught two old German immigrants giving signals to the subs one time" ("Army Man . . .").

Not all the spies were immigrants. As BRHS archivist Peggy McCall pointed out to a reporter recently, the German subs often came in close enough to put one or two people in a boat near land. They'd come ashore and infiltrate into the community, trying to get information (Mills).

The Secret

The Chicago writer who stated in 1942 that there was a radio training school in Boca Raton cannot be faulted for her error. Nobody was supposed to know about the radar. MacSpadden recalled that one night a GI was seen sneaking radar parts off base. When he returned, he faced a searchlight, a machine gun, and several other armed MPs. But he wasn't a spy. He was using parts to build his own set (Kelly).

Mentioning the word "radar" was an offense punishable by court martial. Crack engineers from around the country

came to Boca Raton to refine the new device spoken about in whispers. The men stationed here built it, improved it, and tested it above the waters of the Caribbean. Their work was highly classified (Mays).

As the school's curriculum developed and flight training began to play a larger role in radar training, the number of aircraft assigned to the base increased. The flight section in October 1942 had ten dilapidated bomber-type aircraft which were flown incessantly. The number increased to forty in July 1943 and to ninety-four in March 1944. By 1945, there were one hundred planes regularly assigned to the field. Half of them were B-17s; the others included B-24s, B-26s, and AT-11s (Archives).

MacSpadden, in remembering the field which was constructed under his supervision, added AT-9s, B-34s, and B-25s, as he listed the complement of planes. He recalled that sometimes planes were lined up ten deep, the lines extending from the aprons back into the grass on steel-mesh landing mats (Kelly).

By 1945, almost everyone knew about radar. And the threat of shelling from German subs no longer existed.

The Role of Civilians

Throughout the war effort, civilians were employed. Contractors worked diligently to build runways and base facilities in record time (Archives). Although the acreage was not acquired by the government until May 1942, construction of three 5,200-foot-long airstrips and more than 800 buildings were completed by January 1943 (Archives).

On the base itself, there were civilians in practically all offices and departments. The largest numbers were re-

quired by the academic department, the sub-depot and quartermaster department, and the post engineers. The number of civilians employed by the base averaged 1,200, with a peak of 1,500 (Archives).

Citizens involved themselves in the war effort whether or not they were employed on the base. One of the most important things they did was watch. Residents and army wives organized themselves into teams of two, to stand as observers in the beach watch tower.

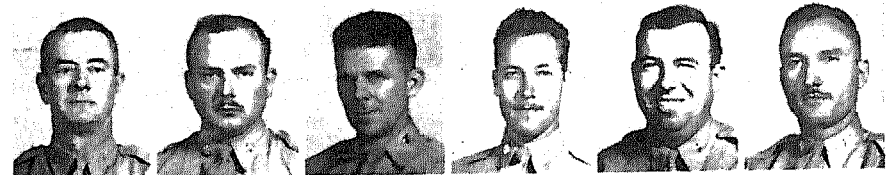
That program was officially terminated in 1944. Helen Howard, one of the observation volunteers, donated her Certificate of Honorable Service and letter of commendation to the BRHS archives. The letter, dated May 27, 1944, tells the story of both the practical and patriotic thrust of this work:

To: All Volunteers of the Aircraft Warning Service.

With the announcement of the War Department of the discontinuance of the Ground Observer Corps and the Aircraft Warning Corps, I want to express my personal appreciation and of all the officers and men of this command to the volunteers who have served so loyally and efficiently with us in the defense of the eastern seaboard.

It has been almost 2 1/2 years since that Sunday in 1941 when thousands of patriotic Americans sprang to the defense of this country by manning round-the-clock watches at Observation Posts, Filter Centers, and Information Centers. It is my conviction that there never existed a more sincere and loyal group of Americans than those who volunteered for this work.

BOCA RATON ARMY AIR FIELD BASE OFFICERS



JAMES K. MCDUFF
Colonel
Base Executive Officer

JOHN H. DUBOIS
Lieutenant Colonel
Base Executive Officer

EDUAR GUINCHER
Lieutenant Colonel
Base Executive Officer

GEORGE W. WHEAT
Lieutenant Colonel
Base Executive Officer

ROBERT W. MULLERBY
Lieutenant Colonel
Base Executive Officer

WILLIE L. MILLER
Lieutenant Colonel
Base Executive Officer



HARRY G. MOSELEY
Lieutenant Colonel
Base Executive Officer

LEONARD J. SMITH
Lieutenant Colonel
Base Executive Officer

ROBERT D. WHEAT
Major
Base Executive Officer

AUGUST C. CARSON
Major
Base Executive Officer

EARL T. CLARK
Major
Base Executive Officer

RAYMOND G. FRIEMAN
Major
Base Executive Officer



HOWARD GRAY
Major
Base Maintenance Officer

BERTRAM J. HAMBERTON, JR.
Major
Base Adjutant

BERTRAM J. JONES
Major
Assistant Base Executive Officer

CHARLES F. QUINTE
Major
Assistant Base Executive Officer

ADRIAN DON SMITH
Major
Base Executive Officer

HENRY W. THOMAS
Major
Base Executive Officer



ROBERT N. WILKINSON
Major
Assistant Air Inspector

FREDERICK W. BLANCHARD
Captain
Assistant Aircraft Maintenance Officer, OIC Flight A

HERSCHEL B. CASEY
Captain
Commanding Sergeant C

DORWIN CHARBONNEAU
Captain
Assistant Aircraft Maintenance Officer, OIC Flight B

HARRY M. DAVIS
Captain
Hospital Adjutant, Squadron I

ANTONIO M. DE ANGELO
Captain
Assistant Aircraft Maintenance Officer, OIC Flight C

You have done a splendid job and have successfully accomplished your particular mission which must now be terminated because of the developments in our strategic situation. Now with the war alert entirely in its offensive phase, I hope and believe that you will turn your patriotic efforts into the forms of work which will help to support the attack and bring the day of victory nearer.

As an indication of the appreciation of this command, and as recognition of your faithful performance of duty as a member of the Aircraft Warning Service, you will receive in the near future the I Fighter Command Certificate of Honorable Service.

I want to thank each of you for all you have done. Your country, the Army Air Forces, and your fellow Americans owe a debt of gratitude to the members of the Aircraft Warning Service.

[signed] Stewart W. Towle, Jr.
(Archives).

Something to Do

Townpeople weren't fully prepared for the change in their lives which the influx of troops would make. Max Hutkin likened it to "the gold rush of the Klondike." Hungry army personnel soon discovered the Hutkins' store. Max and his wife, Nettie, got up each morning a 3 a.m. to make thousands of sandwiches, which would be sold each day by 2:00, for 15 cents each (Sheffield).

Many of the young soldiers didn't like Boca Raton, because there was so little to do. There was a small bus station directly across from Town Hall.

On weekends, GIs would line up for a mile on both sides of that station. If one went to West Palm Beach or Miami, he found the place crawling with servicemen. The highway in both directions would be lined with young men trying to catch a lift to anywhere they might find something to do. The taxis running from Boca Raton to Delray were loaded down with GIs at 25 cents a head (Kelly).

On the other hand, some who came here liked it so much they wanted to live here. Jack Pitts was one of these (Mays).

Pitts arrived at the Boca Raton Air Field in the middle of a moonless night in 1944. He stepped directly from a transport plane into a covered truck. Minutes later, he went through the rear entrance of officers' quarters. Someone called it the Boca Raton Club, but that meant nothing to him. When he awoke the next morning, he looked out the window to see a beautiful golf course and tropical foliage (Mays).

Here was a man, happy where he found himself. And the army moved him. After one month in Boca Raton, Pitts was transferred to Wright Field in Dayton. He did everything he could think of to get transferred back to Florida, and finally he succeeded. He got rid of his Ohio apartment, stored his belongings, and drove with his wife to live in "a little piece of heaven." "We had a '39 La Salle and three months of gas coupons," said Pitts. "We barely made it" (Mays).

Even to those who saw beauty in the place, however, there had to be "something to do." Many found activities in Boca Raton.

A garage was converted into the "GI Funhouse," where soldiers came for cigarettes, beer, dancing, and friendly

wagers. The jukebox rarely stopped. In the beginning, officers used the Boca Raton Hotel or the Cabana Club, but by the end of the war, they had an officer's club (May).

One of the greatest pleasures in town was provided by The Third Air Force Band. On September 22, 1942, fifty-three musicians marched out on the Boca Raton parade grounds after only one practice together. They'd come from the dance bands and orchestras of Jimmy Dorsey, Abe Lyman, Tommy Dorsey, Glenn Miller, Bob Crosby, Artie Shaw, Benny Goodman, Paul Whitman, Al Goodman, Rudy Vallee, Ben Bernie, Richard Himber, Jan Garber, Ted Lewis, Freddie Martin, Vincent Lopez, and Arthur Pryor (Third . . .).

The band grew, and its members were grouped into a symphony orchestra, string quartettes, woodwind octettes, dance band, and modern jazz bands. They played engagements all over south Florida. Everone had a chance to enjoy the music (Third . . .).

ZIM's and Brown's, the two bars in town, were places where townfolk and military personnel alike could drink and laugh. People also met on a friendly basis at Hutkins' supermarket, at Richard's gas station, and Tony Brenk's grocery and post office ("Army Man . . .").

Many residents became acquainted with army wives through their volunteer work. And some townspeople rented rooms in their homes. Betty Brown Devine remembers military family members asking for permission to sleep on the porch of her parents' home, so desperate was the housing situation at times.

Official Cooperation

While citizens were doing their part--working at the base, doing volunteer work, making army personnel and families feel at home--the City Council continued its initial spirit of cooperation. Mayor Mitchell and the council had brought the air base to Boca Raton, and they did everything in their power to make the relationship a pleasant one. They were convinced that the end result would be profitable for the city.

In February 1942, in a special council meeting, a resolution was passed providing for blackouts and penalties for disobedience. One month later, a meeting was called to legally abandon the streets and avenues within the boundaries of the base, for the duration of the war. It was also resolved that the town would lease the municipal airport to the U.S. Government for \$1.00 per year for "such time as the United States Government may desire." The leasee was to pay all taxes during the period of the lease (City Minutes).

In a special council meeting in April 1942, a letter from the county Defense Council Director was read. Listeners were advised that there might be a forthcoming order which would outlaw sirens except in case of an actual enemy attack by air or sea. The council agreed to work out a system whereby they could comply with the order (City Minutes).

In November 1942, the FEC Railroad asked Boca Raton for permission to move a frame building from Delray to Boca Raton. The War Department had asked that this be done, so that all its freight could be accommodated. There wasn't enough room in the depot at Boca Raton. The City Council resolved to allow it, upon payment of necessary fees, but only on the



condition that the building would be securely anchored and made as attractive as possible. It was further resolved that if the FEC didn't remove the building within six months after cessation of hostilities, the town--through its police force--would raze it and "thereby remove it from the town" (City Minutes).

Aftermath and Afterthoughts

Eventually, it was over. Most of the troops packed up and left. Some remained behind; others came back on their own. The townfolk set to picking up the threads of their old way of life, only to find that the lines had never been dropped in the first place. They only changed. There was no going back.

Lucille Zimmerman Morris asserts that before the war, Boca Raton was "just a sleepy little town." The war, she says was the point from which the town grew.

That was certainly what J.C. Mitchell and the City Council had in mind. Throughout the war, the council members had passed cooperative resolutions. They'd seen their town bustle with financial activity. Finally came the time when the air base property returned to the city. In a resolution passed on June 27 1949, the town agreed to pay the army \$251,284.00 for the property; the "excess"--area not needed by the city--was to be sold. With the purchased property came the water system and its easements, the sewer collection system, and the outfall system (City Minutes).

Also included were winding streets, roads, avenues, ways, circles, and alleys (City Minutes). The irregular pattern of some of the streets--as well as the resemblance to curvy mountain roads of such thoroughfares as West Second Avenue,

Meadows Road, and Fortieth Street--are said to be due to military planning. They were supposedly built with irregularities so that German subs wouldn't be able to blow out a whole road at once (Mays). Some have surmised, however, that the workers were in such a hurry, they built the roads around rocks, trees, and shrubs rather than stopping to remove them.

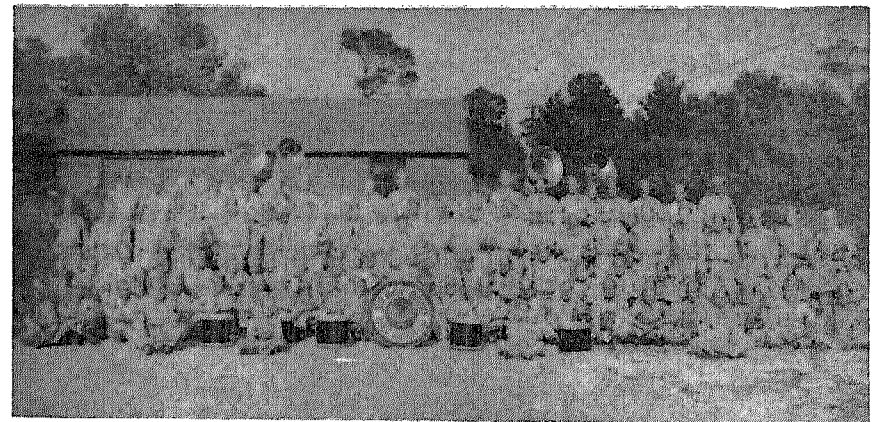
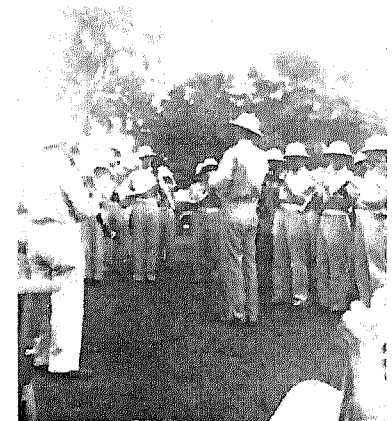
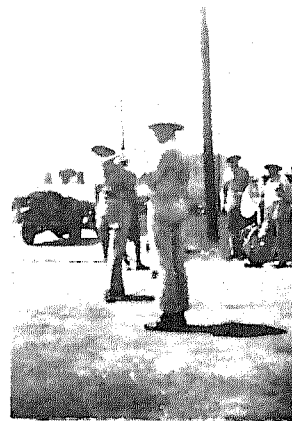
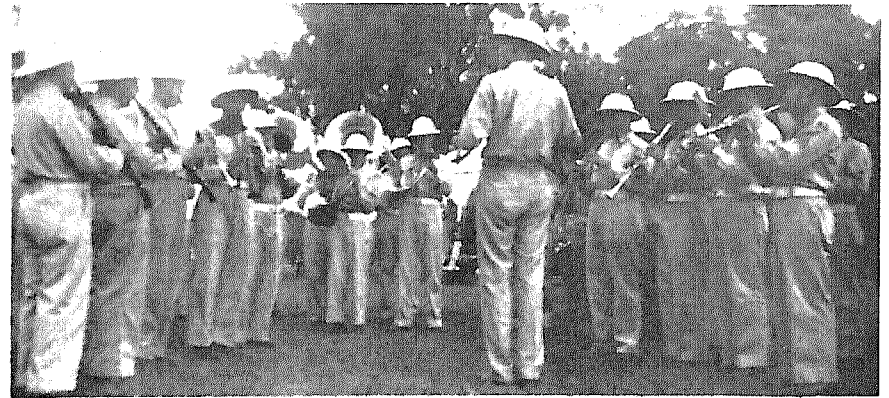
One can still see the H-shaped buildings around town. At the northeast corner of Florida Atlantic University's grounds, the cluster of white frame buildings now used for warehouses are also remnants of the air base.

The most noticeable leftovers are probably the runways left behind by the Army Air Corps. FAU uses them for parking lots.

Have you ever driven to the northern-most parking lot when no one was around--no cars parked, all students away studying or doing whatever they do when they're not in class? Have you ever driven north on that parking lot/runway, a little faster than you usually drive, almost feeling that you're going to lift off any second? It may make you think of the young men who came here to train, flying off to test the new radar in the Caribbean. They graduated and went all over the world. Some didn't come back.

As you drive down that old runway, perhaps you can imagine the excitement and the passion that those young men must have felt. They carried a secret called radar, and their mission was mixed up with dreams of glory, a sense of purpose, and--yes--patriotism.

Very much a part of it, was Boca Raton.



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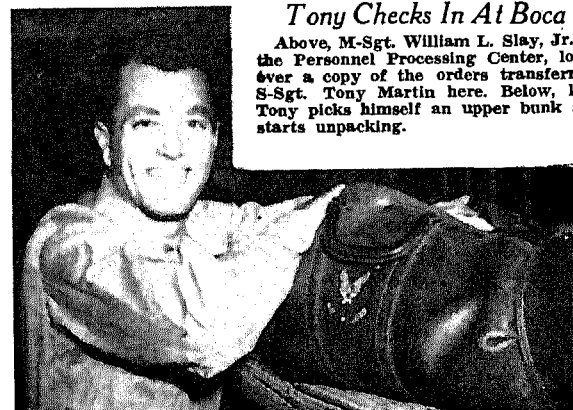
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Tony Checks In At Boca

Above, M-Sgt. William L. Slay, Jr., of the Personnel Processing Center, looks over a copy of the orders transferring S-Sgt. Tony Martin here. Below, left, Tony picks himself an upper bunk and starts unpacking.

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