

# The Spanish River Papers

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## **WOMEN OF THE BOCA RATON ARMY AIR FIELD**

By

Aubrey Kintop

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Boca Raton  
Historical  
Society &  
Museum



## **PREFACE**

This article presents information about the women who served at the Boca Raton Army Air Field during World War II.

## **Author Bio**

Aubrey Kintop is currently a teacher in Broward County. She received her M.A. in History at Florida Atlantic University in 2011 and her B.A. in American Studies and English from the University of Connecticut in 2009. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Florida Historical Society Conference in 2011 and at the Boca Raton Historical Society & Museum's Town Hall talks lecture series in October of the same year.

**“Hats off to the Wearers of the Khaki Skirt”:  
Women of the Boca Raton Army Air Field  
Aubrey Kintop August 2014**

*“I was trained as a registered nurse. I was young. Nothing bothered me. It’s not that I didn’t appreciate the wounded, but it was my job as a nurse to care for them. If we got upset and worried about it, we never could have done the job.”<sup>1</sup> Edith Mize Lewis*

With the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the United States’ involvement in World War II was eminent. Bernice Butler, a nursing student at the University of Tennessee at Memphis, was in her last year of schooling when President Roosevelt declared the country’s participation in the war. She, along with several nurses from her graduating class, volunteered to join the nurse corps; Bernice put in a request for Florida, and just a few weeks later was sent to Boca Raton Army Air Field in Boca Raton, Florida. Along with hundreds of other women over the next four years, Bernice became involved with the war on numerous levels at Boca Raton.<sup>2</sup>



Boca Raton Army Air Field (BRAAF) was home to thousands of men and women from 1942 to 1947. It was one of twenty-seven Army Air Fields located in Florida during the 1930s and 1940s. BRAAF’s sole objective was to be a radar training facility. Radar was a secret technology at the start of the war, therefore requiring the people involved in its workings to not leak any classified information. While the majority of people working on the base were men,

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<sup>1</sup> Boca News.

<sup>2</sup> Bernice Butler Chavez, interview by author, Miami FL, September 28, 2010.

women played a significant role in running and maintaining the effectiveness of the base. BRAAF was the only *Army Air Corps* radar training facility in the United States during World War II. The base opened in 1942, temporarily taking over the Boca Raton Hotel until the base was fully completed. With Boca Raton's population numbering in the hundreds, it suddenly became overwhelmed with tens of thousands of soldiers that would forever change the town. This tiny Florida town was rapidly growing, along with many other towns throughout the Sunshine State.<sup>3</sup>

Florida's involvement in World War II was quite unique. It was home to 172 military installations for defense and training. Florida's beaches were often closed or restricted, "cause you could see the [German] boats out there and you were not supposed to be seen 'cause you could be shot." With rumors constantly flooding the east coast of Germans coming ashore to hide in abandoned houses, or even heading to local pubs for a drink while their boat was anchored offshore, Florida residents experienced WWII in a different way than the average US citizen. Whether these stories were simply rumors or not, they shaped the way the Florida coastal people would look at the people surrounding them. While Florida's military bases were obviously vital to the success of the United States in World War II, there has been little research done on their overall significance to the country's success.<sup>4</sup>

The level of women's involvement in World War II has been exhaustively examined and written about. Women were pilots, secretaries, mothers, radio operators, nurses, mechanics, switchboard operators, wives, electricians, etc. They were required to not only work in their traditional domestic roles, but were also expected to fill in the missing gaps left by men fighting

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<sup>3</sup> The sole book written about BRAAF: Sally Ling, *Small Town, Big Secrets: Inside the Boca Raton Army Air Field During World War II*, (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> For insight into Florida's involvement in World War II, see: Nick Wynne and Richard Moorhead, *Florida in World War II: Floating Fortress*, (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2010); Betty Thompson, interview by author, Ft. Lauderdale, FL, September 21, 2010.

overseas. Each of these roles has been scrutinized, explained, and thoroughly discussed. However, the civilian and military women who worked at BRAAF had to fill all of these roles, and many others, in secrecy. While not all women on base knew about the radar technology, it was likely that they were somehow connected with a person involved, especially since many of the nurses married pilots on base who were secretly training with the technology. For BRAAF, almost all of the women serving in the military were nurses working at the base hospital. These nurses came from all over the country, and, after a few years of training, allowed military facilities to be fully supported by a trained medical staff. Women's involvement with nursing the wounded was vital to winning the war and keeping soldiers alive.<sup>5</sup>

The Air Field provided a great source of employment for both military and civilian women. While there were numerous other military bases where women worked, few, if any, were as secretive as BRAAF, causing a level of difficulty in obtaining accurate information. Sadly, there are not many women who are still around to share their experiences at the base. By interviewing both civilian and military women that are still alive, their stories should help to paint a realistic picture of life during the war in Boca Raton, hopefully to show how their experience might have differed from other Floridian women. While each woman's experience was unique, the combination of their stories will help to show what could not be published due to the private nature of the base. Their story is an exceptional one; for women all over the United

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<sup>5</sup> For details about women's responsibilities and life on the home front: Emily Yellin, *American Women at Home and at the Front During World War II*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2004); Julie Barrett Litoff and David C. Smith, *Since You Went Away: World War II Letters from American Women on the Home Front*, (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 1991); Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda During World War II*, (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984). For more information about nurses in World War II, see: Diane Burke Fessler, *No Time for Fear: Voices of American Military Nurses in World War II*, (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1996); Elizabeth M. Norman, *We Band of Angels: The Untold Story of American Nurses Trapped on Bataan by the Japanese*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1999); Barbara Brooks Tomblin, *G.I. Nightingales: The Army Nurse Corps in World War II*, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996).

States diligently worked to support the war effort, but Boca Raton's women had to do so in secrecy.<sup>6</sup>



Edna Durham, a civilian postal worker at BRAAF. *Edna Durham Collection BRHS&M*

Bernice Butler grew up in small town in rural Arkansas. As a young girl, she attended Oakflat Elementary, a two room country school, where a visit from a public health nurse made her realize her dreams. After graduating as salutatorian of her class, “I taught school because I tried to go into nurses’ training but I lacked one half credit in algebra that the university required.” While teaching, Stuttgart High School changed algebra to be worth a full credit, rather than a half, so Bernice was able to apply to nurse’s school. She spent three years training as a nurse at the University of Tennessee at Memphis. The class size dropped from approximately thirty-two girls to seventeen that graduated together. After graduation, Bernice and many of her fellow graduating nurses volunteered to join the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) and help with the war effort; “everyone was gung-ho to help.” The WAAC had

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<sup>6</sup> For information about oral histories specifically of World War II veterans, see: Studs Terkel, *“The Good War”*: *An Oral History of World II*, (New York: The New Press, 1984); Tom Brokhaw, *The Greatest Generation Speaks: Letters and Reflections*, (New York: Random House Publishing, 2005); Edward M. Coffman, “Talking about War: Reflections on Doing Oral History and Military History,” *Journal of American History*, 87 vol.2 (September 2000): 582–92; Alistair Thomson, “Memory as a Battlefield: Personal and Political Investments in the National Military Past,” *The Oral History Review*, 22.2 (Winter 1995): 55–73; Rodney Earl Walton, “Memories from the Edge of the Abyss: Evaluating the Oral Accounts of World War II Veterans,” *The Oral History Review*, 37, vol. 1 (Summer 2010): 18-34.

a “long-standing tradition of being a nursing corps of unmarried, female, white, volunteer graduate nurses,” and these girls fit into exactly what the government envisioned as a perfect nurse. Along with two of her friends, Bernice placed a request to be sent to sunny Boca Raton, Florida. A few weeks later, the three girls were all shipped to Florida to be stationed at Boca Raton Army Air Field to work in the hospital on base.<sup>7</sup>

Nurses at BRAAF hospital 1943; Bernice Butler on far right. *Anne Maguire Collection, BRHS&M*



As part of the WAAC, Bernice was “not entitled to military rank, [was] paid less than regular Army personnel, and [was] not eligible for military benefits.” Congresswoman Edith Nourse Rodgers introduced legislation in 1942 to form the WAAC; despite the fact that it was received with mixed emotions from both sexes, it was established a few months later. However, this did not stop the public from crying out against it: “women produce the young, manage the home: that mere men support and defend it. I am a bit fed up with having the entire brick passed to us - for often we are called upon also to provide the support; and now the defense.” Many men and women believed that a woman’s place was not fighting the offensive side of the war:

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<sup>7</sup> Bernice Butler Chavez, interview by author, Miami FL, September 28, 2010; Barbara Brooks Tomblin, *G. I. Nightingales: The Army Nurse Corps in World War II*, (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1996).

women were responsible for maintaining the home and family while their husbands were away fighting the war.<sup>8</sup>

By the end of 1942, the government expanded the number of jobs for women giving “a clear indication of the relationship between the needs of the government and its willingness to accept women in non-traditional positions.” However, the government needed women to fill jobs to support the war effort. The WAAC just happened to be one of the largest fillers. With Daytona Beach being one of the first four WAAC training centers, many of the first true army women ended up in the Sunshine State. With such a large push from the women involved, the WAAC became the Women’s Army Corps (WAC) in July of 1943, making WAC part of the army and giving women a much larger range of benefits.<sup>9</sup>



WACs outside BRAAF hospital 1943.  
*Anne Maguire Collection, BRHS&M*

When the women arrived at BRAAF as WAACs, they received little extra training. Similar to the Bachelor’s Officers Quarters on military bases, nurses were stationed in Nurses’ Quarters, often connected to the hospital on base. Bernice recalls, “We each had our own room

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<sup>8</sup> Laurie Scrivener, “U.S. Military Women in World War II: The SPAR, WAC, WAVES, & Women Marines in U.S. Government Publications,” *Journal of Government Information*, 4 vol. 26: 363; Lemoine, Katherine, “Enlistment of Women Opposed,” *The New York Times*, (New York: June 8, 1942): 14.

<sup>9</sup> Melissa S. Herbert, “Amazons or Butterflies; The Recruitment of Women into the Military During World War II,” *Minerva*, 9 (1991) 50; Katherine Lemoine, “Enlistment of Women Opposed,” *The New York Times*, (New York: June 8, 1942): 14; Laurie Scrivener, “U.S. Military Women in World War II: The SPAR, WAC, WAVES, & Women Marines in U.S. Government Publications,” *Journal of Government Information*, 4 vol. 26: 364.

with a cot, we had a shade of some kind with the window, and then the [common] bathrooms were down the hall... but we had a lavatory in our room, a closet, and a cot. That was it... We got orange crates for a bedside table ... And you made do - everybody's in the same shape.” Women and men were dealing with equal conditions, but their pay, benefits, and ranking paled in comparison. Once they became WACs, their status changed significantly, though there was still a discrepancy. A small number of WACs at BRAAF had administrative jobs on base, but the majority of WACs were nurses.<sup>10</sup>



WAC technician at BRAAF 1943.  
*Air Force Historical Research  
Agency Collection, BRHS&M.*

Similar to many military hospitals throughout the country, BRAAF suffered from a shortage of nurses. Bernice Chavez vividly remembers that being a large problem that the women had to face: “We had a shortage of nurses, and we all worked at the hospital on shifts. And we worked twelve hour days: twelve hours on, and twelve hours off.” Despite the fact that almost all of the patients that the BRAAF nurses were seeing had never been overseas and injuries were rare, it was still important that patients were taken care of to insure a speedy recovery back to radar training. While there were only a few major accidents on BRAAF, it

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<sup>10</sup> Bernice Butler Chavez; Manuel Chavez Jr., email message to author, November 10, 2010.

helped to properly train the nurses, many of whom would be sent overseas to treat patients on a significantly larger scale.<sup>11</sup>

BRAAF Hospital 1943. *Air Force Historical Research Agency Collection, BRHS&M.*



Some women wanted to push their job limitations a step further. As a nurse, there was an opportunity to advance from the Boca Air Field: become a flight nurse. A few of the nurses stationed at Boca Raton applied and were accepted. Upon their acceptance, women went through rigorous training to prepare themselves for this occupation. One in particular, Edith Mize Lewis, who was trained at BRAAF, eventually went on to become a flight nurse in the 816<sup>th</sup> Medical Evacuation Squadron of the 9<sup>th</sup> Air Force. She claimed that, “I think nurses handle death better than doctors. They’re more realistic about it. Some doctors won’t ever admit a patient is going to die.” Lewis prided herself on one of the most sensational statistics of the war: a soldier never died in her care. This woman flew over fifty missions and even helped to take care of the prisoners from Buchenwald, a Nazi concentration camp, when the Allies had freed the people being held there. Her training from Boca proved to be truly successful and a testament to how dedicated these women truly were to their work. Wesley Craven states, “flight

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<sup>11</sup> Bernice Butler Chavez.

nurses with the AAF did pioneer in new uses for skills and at the same time contributed to the relatively low mortality rate of wounded soldiers in World War II.” Although flight nurses were not trained at BRAAF, many of the skills that they brought with them to flight training, were learned at BRAAF.<sup>12</sup>



Fight Nurse Edith Mize Lewis. *Edith Mize Lewis Collection, BRHS&M*



While one would expect a great deal of problems to arise between all male doctors and all female nurses, according to the interviews given for this paper, none recalled any negative interactions. Bernice argues that, “and we were respected, the nurses were well respected by everyone.” Had these women not been there to take care of injuries and sickness, the base would not have been able to function. Their kindness and good will while taking care of patients helped to ensure recuperation. Many of these women that worked together became friends and created life-long friendships. Furthermore, it allowed them to spend some of their down time together:

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<sup>12</sup> *Florida Nursing News*, July 6, 1985; Margo Harakas, “Boca Nurse Gets Medals at Last,” *Sun Sentinel*, April 12, 1994; Wesley Frank Craven, “Women in the Army Airforce,” in *The Army Air Forces in World War II. Volume 7. Services Around the World*, ed. Wesley Frank Craven, James Lea Cate, (Washington D.C.: Office of Air Force History, 1983): 537.

We were working a lot, but we had our own little recreation room, which we didn't have very much time to relax since we were working twelve hour days.”<sup>13</sup>

In the midst of this tumultuous time, military personnel had been brought in from all over the country to work together at BRAAF. Men and women were placed in close quarters with time off and dances to attend; for the men, the threat of being sent overseas was looming over their head daily. Both military and civilian people during World War II commonly got married in a short time period, without the slightest hesitation. After not having lived on the base for an entire year yet, both Bernice Chavez, and her two friends that came with her from University of Tennessee (Ann Hooten and Gladys Gillis) had met their husbands and were married. However, getting married on the military base came with one large problem: “The only disadvantage: our parents, no-one could travel during that time except military people unless you got really special [approval]. And that was hard to do. So, our parents couldn't come.” While friends from the base could attend, many women said it was tough to walk down the aisle without their parents there to witness. During war time, both men and women realized the importance of companionship, and unusual measures had to be taken to have stability.<sup>14</sup>



Dance held at Boca Raton Army Air Field December 23, 1943. *Air Force Historical Research Agency Collection, BRHS&M.*

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<sup>13</sup> Bernice Chavez.

<sup>14</sup> Bernice Chavez.

War time marriages happened quickly, either out of necessity or desire. Bernice cannot recall a nurse that she worked with that was not dating an officer or enlisted man. Women's responsibilities now expanded from the private, household sphere, to a much more public and business sphere. By getting married and having children, women were now expected to work to support the war effort, comfort their husband when he was home and away, and cover the responsibilities of two parents. It was difficult to maintain any level of independence. Even in the recruitment process for women to work, "Little in the recruitment propaganda stressed that a woman should do the job for herself or her country, but rather that she should do it for 'her man' in the trenches." The government needed women to work, and motivating them through their own patriotic desires and urging them to break out of their private sphere, women joined the forces in record numbers.<sup>15</sup>

Bernice Butler marries BRAAF pilot Manny Chavez at the base chapel, *Chavez Collection, BRHS&M*



By marrying an airman, especially a pilot, women often had to be the support system for their husband. BRAAF, because it was a training facility, had multiple plane crashes and accidents throughout the war. Bernice's husband, Manny, recalls his thoughts from his years as a pilot: "When a plane crashed on base it was a traumatic experience. We were only a small

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<sup>15</sup> Herbert, 50.

group of pilots, ten of which were my flying school classmates. Three of them died within a two year period. One of my classmates was flying a B-34, I was right behind him on the runway prepared to take off right after he cleared the runway. An engine failed just as he lifted off the runway...” Bernice not only had to take care of any injuries, cope with the situation for herself, but often had to help her husband get through the experience as well. Most plane crashes resulted in death, but with that many people constantly dying, one must learn how to grieve and cope with the situation that they are in. Often, men turned to their wives for strength and to keep their family structure together through such tragic times.<sup>16</sup>

With BRAAF being one of the largest radar training facilities in the United States, there were obviously some sections that had restricted access. In order to get on the base at all, there were a number of security precautions that both civilians and military had to go through. Betty Thompson, a civilian who worked in the supply office, remembers that all cars had identification stickers, everyone had to always wear their identification card, and no-one could drive on or off the base when planes were taking off because of its very central location to the runway. Manny Chavez knows that for the certain locations of the base that were top secret and used for training the radar, “Those were all surrounded by wire and barbed wire on top. And they were all controlled by guards – they had to go in and out. All students had to be cleared.” While not everyone knew about what was going on inside of those buildings or not is still left up to debate due to the mixed information that was received. Barbed wire, whether there is a sign identifying what is behind it or not, gives way to people spreading rumors about what lies behind the area that they cannot observe.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Manuel Chavez Jr., email message to author, November 10, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Betty Thompson; Manuel Chavez Jr., interviewed by author, Miami, FL, September 28, 2010.

BRAAF's secrecy can be contested. Every person working at BRAAF, both military and civilian, had a different memory about what the secrecy of the base was like. As a nurse, Bernice remembers that, "We were never told to not speak about it or anything... in fact, they didn't tell us it was a secret base, I didn't know it until the war was over." While others like Evangeline Melton Johnson attended meetings to brief her and her fellow staff on what the Air Corps was working on and to let them know what information they could not share with others. Evangeline said, "it was hush-hush... all the things that needed to be kept quiet was quiet. I mean you had a lot of meetings that you had to go to. And they had a big, open theater-type place, and you had to go to bond drives, or briefings, or sometimes general announcements." One must question why some people on the base were aware of these secrets and some were not. And if Mrs. Johnson was a civilian working on base, how did she know more about the radar training than the nurses? Unless a larger sample of women from BRAAF arises, historians may never know.<sup>18</sup>

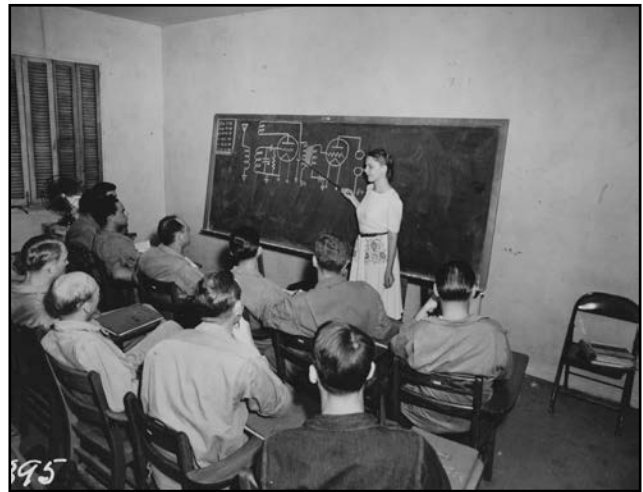
William H. Kelly, an Air Corps veteran knew that his missions were all top secret: "knowing the secrecy of what I was in, and not knowing what it was, it was -- it was nip and tuck really, because we were under tremendous pressure really to get our training." Whether Mr. Kelly is referring to the secrecy of the radar-training missions, or others, is unclear. Manny Chavez, a B-17 pilot on the base, was well aware of the secret research the base was involved in. He writes, "It was primarily centered in the academic side of the operation: classrooms and radar development labs... the classroom buildings and radar storage facilities were heavily guarded." If so many of the pilots were working with the radar system, did they share this information with their friends or wives? Because women were most commonly found in the hospital, or in civilian jobs, their exposure to the radar facilities and information pertaining to it

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<sup>18</sup> Bernice Butler Chavez, interviewed by author, Miami, FL, November 2, 2010.

must have been quite limited. While there is photographic evidence that women were teachers on the base for engineering and electrical classes, it is unknown whether they taught information about radar's capabilities. Regardless, there was a great deal of information that was not supposed to go outside of BRAAF's gates.<sup>19</sup>

BRAAF civilian instructor (radio). *Air Force Historical Research Agency Collection, BRHS&M*



*The Transmitter*, the newspaper for BRAAF, included only a few articles about women in their paper. However, the articles discovered in the newspapers pertaining to women rarely had anything substantial to say. There are pictures of nurses and pilots getting married on base and pictures of WACs showing the newest style of uniforms. But there were no articles found that discuss the importance of the women on base, or any accomplishment or true achievement that they had. Some listed promotions that women had amongst the nurse corps, but never in as much detail as the men moving up the rankings. Photographs make up the majority of information about women and only a little description is given. However, the one article that stands above is worthy of noting. Sergeant James P. Chapman, Editor of *The Transmitter* wrote:

Those fancy, new service ribbons you see the WACs sporting so proudly these days represent more than voluntary enlistment in the corps. They are a symbol of

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<sup>19</sup> William Kelly Collection (AFC/2001/001/23447), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress; Manuel Chavez, e-mail message to author, September 29, 2010.

courageous womanhood which has never been better exemplified than by the women who wear them... These lasses who wear these ribbons had a taste of Army life, knew it was no soft existence and foresaw even tougher days ahead, but refused to take advantage of the privilege offered all of 'em to return to civilian status. Instead they chose to keep on the uniform and do their bit to help bring this war to a successful and speedy conclusion. Hats off to these wearers of the khaki skirt.<sup>20</sup>

This glimpse into the personal beliefs of Army Air Corps men is not only rare, but incredibly valuable. With many people disagreeing with the government allowing women to enter the military, these soldiers go even further than acknowledging women's service. They are saying that women's work is helping to end the war, which will hopefully show the public that women are needed in order to win this. While most of the population is busy thanking the men for their service, the men are admitting that they might not be winning the war without their help. Furthermore, Sgt. Chapman points out that women's service was voluntary (while a vast majority of the male soldiers involved were drafted in) showing their true courage and patriotism for their country.

With World War II coming to a close, women slowly began leaving their jobs as pilots, mechanics, secretaries, flight instructors, and many others. As more and more men began returning home, women were forced back into their private sector and taken out of the prominent business roles they had been playing for the last five or so years. This was no different in Florida. By the fall of 1945, the war was complete and BRAAF began scaling back its base. Because the buildings were erected so quickly, little care was given to construction and maintenance of the structures. With multiple large hurricanes sweeping over the area in the next two years helping to slowly deteriorate the buildings, almost all of the base was wiped out by a large hurricane that hit the air field head on in 1947.

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<sup>20</sup> Sgt. James P. Chapman, "WAC Ribbons," *The Transmitter*, October 6, 1943.



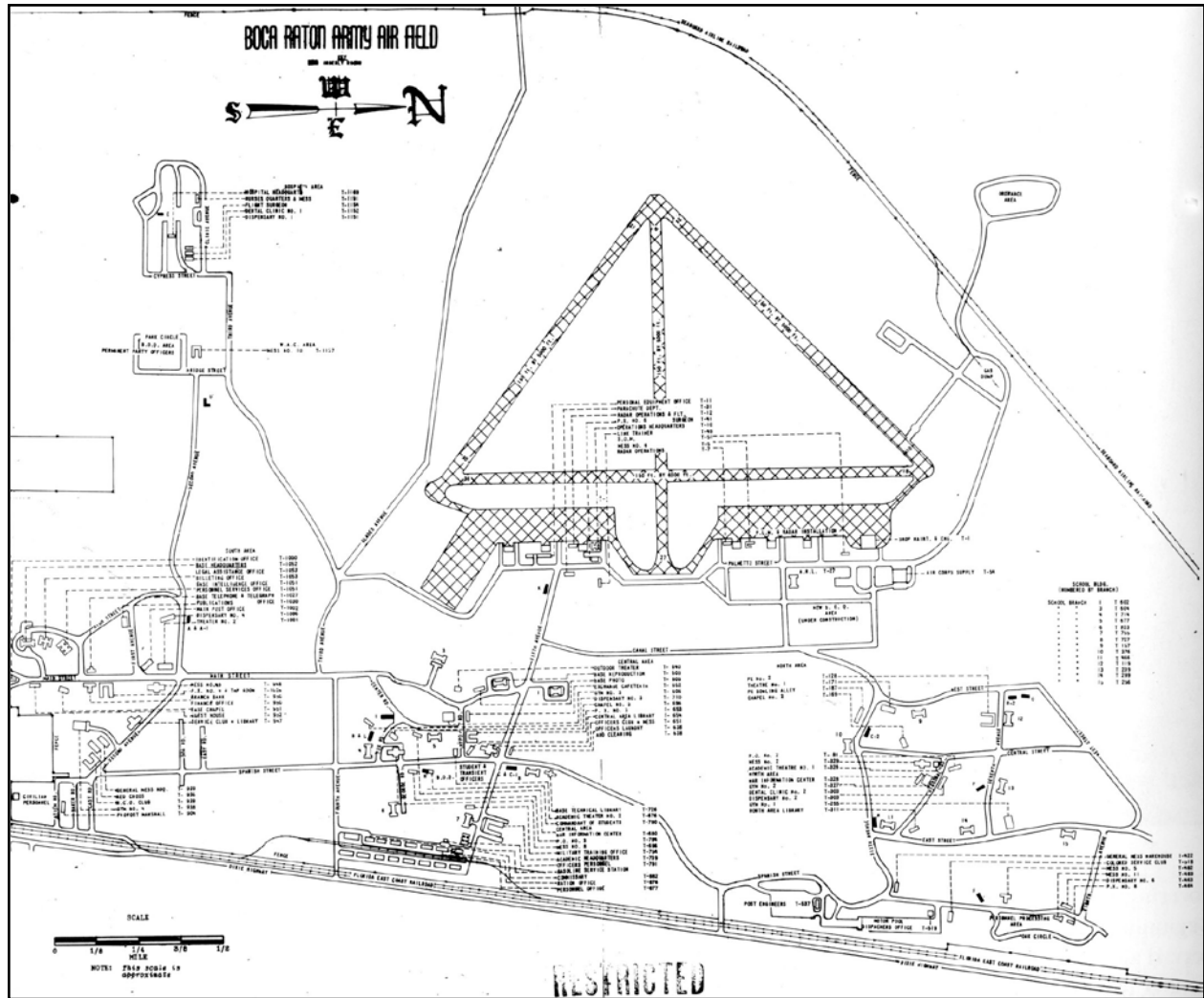
The hurricane of September 1947 destroyed many of the buildings at BRAAF and ensured the closure of the base. *Carol Wolfe Collection, BRHS&M*

Had the hurricane not closed down the airbase, women's impact on the air field would have been everlasting. The men who worked on the base will forever know that the women who worked with them had a substantial and notable effect on its success. While there were hundreds of airbases throughout the United States, Boca Raton Army Air Field underwent quite a unique war experience. Not only did the size of Boca Raton skyrocket during the war, but it gave thousands of jobs to military and civilian men and women and housed a top secret radar training facility.

In a *New York Times* article published in January of 1945, the editor wrote, "The Wac [sic] in this war, like her sisters in uniform, "will always be a civilian at heart." Women were placed back into their typical roles, but their memories of the war will never be forgotten. In reminiscing about the past, many of these people brought back memories they had not thought about for decades dealing with aspects of both military and civilian life. World War II participants tend to be of a "reticent generation" but at this point in their life, their story needs to be shared. As time ticks away, the silence of Boca Raton Army Air Field needs to be broken, before there is no one left to tell the story.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> "Wac's Femininity is Increased by Service, She 'Will Always Remain a Civilian at Heart,'" *The New York Times* (New York: January 19, 1945): 22; Rodney Earl Walton, "Memories from the Edge of the Abyss: Evaluating the Oral Accounts of World War II Veterans," *The Oral History Review*, 37, vol. 1 (Summer 2010): 22.



*The Boca Raton Army Air Field extended from Palmetto Park Road on the South to north of Yamato Road on the north; and from Dixie Highway on the east to today's CSX tracks (think I-95) on the west. The hospital and women's quarters are shown at upper left on this map—not too far from today's Boca Raton Hospital.*



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