

Construction of BRAAF by Colonel Arnold MacSpadden

(Transcript of a speech given to the local Circle K by Arnold MacSpadden in 1966)



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Opening Statement:

Your program chairman a month ago asked me to remember back a while ago and comment on the construction of the army base on these premises back in 1942. It might be of interest to you, I hope so.

The War Department, as it was then called, had the problem of establishing temporary bases where radar could be taught to a sizeable number of selected troops. Boca Raton was finally chosen as the Air Corps site after two other sites were ruled out for one reason or another. The first radar instruction site was built at Hobe Sound near Stuart, Florida, the Using Service was the Army Signal Corps – incidentally the present state park called Jonathan Dickinson Park occupies the old reservation area now.



Arnold MacSpadden

It might be interesting to you to know that the United States at the time that war was declared, Dec. 7th 1941, did not have the technical know how to proceed with the instruction of radar operation. The War Department as a result dispatched in all phases of radar equipment and operation – there was also the problem of knowing how to build a camp and facilities to teach radar, all this was learned in a hurry.

In any case the first week in June of 1942, I was ordered from Hobe Sound to Boca Raton, a small crossroads town of 200 or less, to get busy with the layout and construction of the first air base for the instruction of radar in the U.S. The War Department directive required that beneficial occupancy was to be given to the first troops in approximately three months with complete occupancy in four and a half months – this was considered to be quite an order – but then there was a war going on and a great need was had for this radar service.

Among other items for the engineer it was a problem of planning the work and acquiring the materials without loss of time, to meet the required dates. Moreover I should say that the engineer was in addition the contracting officer – which required that he schedule the receipt of construction plans and advertise for bids for the various phases of work. The job was considered to be an average sized cantonment project, but instead of employing the prime contractor and allowing him to sub-contract the work that he did not wish to do with his own forces, I elected to contract all the work from the job office, so there were 35 contractors involved, finally, in a very fast moving job. They were all parties to a contract with the United States. I must say that the work sailed along on time and even exceeded the difficult schedules prescribed.

Usually every construction project has its big moments of success, and this one was no exception – the engineer was aware of two main problems confronting him; first... to search and find suitable materials in the surrounding ground to make a stabilizing agent for the sand and then to find a good grade of base material for all the roads and runways. After examining the area within about a five mile haul, we found good hard lime rock and lime slurry in the Deerfield area. This enabled us to place up to 9,000 cu. yds of this material per day – the excellence of this material can be witnessed today by just looking at the runways and riding over them and consider they were built 24 years ago. The second problem... was the scarcity of acceptable lumber – all lumber was ordered thru Washington. The end result was not satisfactory because you might have several cars of lumber on the track but none that you could use because of size or kind. The upshot of this deal was to find another way out. Block Manufacturer in Miami had a yard full of concrete blocks that he could not sell because of war time restrictions so he offer them to me for about 8 cents per block, delivered to the job. We put up a million dollars worth of buildings with block, this helped the lumber dilemma quite a bit. Today you can still see the school buildings still doing business as apartments mostly, and the large warehouses along the railroad serving as manufacturing buildings. Without the lime rock and without the block, the job would not have been completed on time... That's success.

The job here, included about a thousand buildings, originally, ... four – 5,000 ft runways with taxiways and aprons and all of the allied facilities required to operate an airfield. The post was considered to be in a high degree of security and so had plenty of guard mounts surrounding the reservation. Even so much so that I found it difficult to find some of the buildings easy of access. To point this out, let me say that to enter the post you had to show a general pass, but then to enter in to the operators or mechanics areas it was necessary to show an area pass and then to enter a school building of which there were 16, another pass was required.

The construction of the entire post was required to be done under camouflaged conditions – this meant that any trees or scrub existing remained unless it was positively in the way of a building or other structure. It seems odd now to imagine this post to be in any danger of attack – but it was. During the period of construction the entire east coast of Florida was lined with sunken ships, mostly tankers sunk by German submarines. In fact it was stated in 1942 that every 4 miles from the Keys to Jacksonville there was either a bow or a stern of a sunken tanker showing just off the beach.

Because of the extreme emergency requirement for radar operators, the Army could not wait for the completion of the new post, so they leased the Boca Raton Club for a preliminary camp and moved troops and equipment into the hotel to start the instruction program – you can say without fear of contradiction that the Army never had it so good. Interestingly let me add that it was reported that a U Boat was spotted by radar from one of the club turrets and a call was made for aircraft cover from Miami. This event placed more pressure on us to get the Air Field completed for immediate protection from this site.

Back to the engineer – it was required that the runways support a 30,000 pound wheel load – but when the runways were tested for actual strength they showed by actual test that they would support the heaviest bomber in the United States. So it wasn't long before the field was full of B-29 bombers with 120,000 pound wheel load.

I will close this little story by saying that after 4 months in Boca Raton and 12 million dollars spent on labor and materials I went on to build 7 other installations in this country and South America. Of all my experiences I can say that the post here affords me a great deal of satisfaction

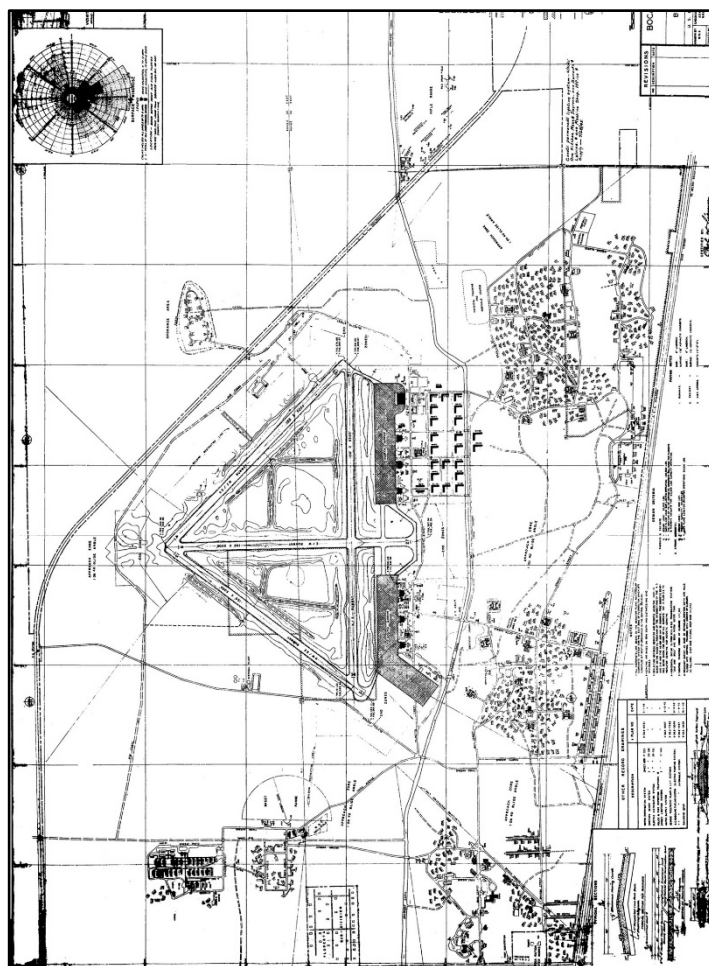
(1) because the post served its intended use well for a relatively small outlay of money and (2) now its use as an institution of higher learning is very satisfying and I say long may it be so.



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*Map of the Boca Raton Army Air Field shown ca. 1945 looking North;
southern boundary was Palmetto Park Road*