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FORT MYERS DURING WORLD WAR II

by Thomas F. Cox, Jr.

As war swept across Europe and Asia in 1940, Fort Myers lay sleeping in the Florida sunshine. Its citizens little realized the profound effect World War II would have on the small town on the southwest coast of Florida. Fort Myers had 10,545 residents, and the entire Lee County had only 17,488 people. The city had grown little since the 1920s, when a combination of poor publicity, hurricanes and inadequate planning brought a collapse of Florida’s boom. The depression of the 1930s brought growth to a virtual standstill.¹

World War II had an enormous, positive and immediate impact on the economy of Lee County, and it also was the beginning of present expansion. Following the war, the growth of Fort Myers and Lee County was solid and steady, spearheaded by the tourist industry and new residents. Prior to the war, visitors had been mainly very wealthy people who wintered in Fort Myers. The installation of military bases in Lee County during the war brought servicemen, who later returned to the area not merely to visit, but to live, work and raise families.²

Even before entry of the United States into World War II, signs of military preparation abounded in the area. To take advantage of south Florida’s fine, year-round flying weather, schools were established at Riddle-McKay Field at Clewiston and Dorr Field at Arcadia by the British Royal Air Force (RAF) to train flyers during early autumn 1941. Fort Myers opened its doors to the newly arrived RAF cadets and officers at Clewiston. To welcome the 150 men, the Lee County Junior Chamber of Commerce organized an outing in Fort Myers for the weekend of October 11-12, 1941. Volunteers in the community offered thirty automobiles, Glades Bus Lines donated a bus and the American Legion loaned its “locomotive,” a facsimile of a steam locomotive which operated on roads. The contingent left Fort Myers at 12:30 p.m. on October 11. Returning from Clewiston with the British airmen, hosts opened their homes to them. A fish fry was held at the Elk’s Club followed by a dance with “100 local girls on hand to entertain them.” The British airmen were taken to churches on Sunday morning, and a picnic dinner was arranged for them at Fort Myers Beach on Sunday afternoon by the Women’s Community Club.³

The 125 cadets and two officers who came to Fort Myers were struck by the friendliness and informality of the local population. “Pretty girls with soft voices who were easy to talk with” impressed one cadet, who also enjoyed being able to dance without a jacket. The British Airmen found jitterbug dancing the most interesting discovery. “This is new stuff to us,” said another cadet, “but it is a lot of fun.” Several local couples put on an exhibition of jitterbugging and were soon joined by the airmen. “Nobody fell down,” reported the Fort Myers News Press. Mullet and hushpuppies were also new fare to the Englishmen. “We don’t have such fish in England,” one of the airmen noted. “It tastes fresh and our fish are mostly too old. These hushpuppies are something new, but they taste good.”⁴

On September 16, 1940, the United States Selective Training and Service Act became law, instituting the country’s first peacetime draft. October 16 was set as registration day for all males.⁵
between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-five. A national lottery system was used to determine who would be selected. Following registration day, a local board consisting of a chairman and two other members was set up. Once registration was complete a permanent draft board was appointed by the governor. Lee County registered 2,164 men.5

Local men also volunteered for military service. The United States Navy brought a mobile recruiting unit to Fort Myers in mid-October 1941, and twenty enlisted.6 The following month, the United States Army Air Corps sent a recruiter who indicated that volunteers would also be accepted in the regular army as “unlimited vacancies existed for enlistment in both the regular army and the air corps.”7 Fort Myers soldiers home on leave brought news of maneuvers in Louisiana. They reported that “war games” included severe hardships and even deaths.8

Like other Americans, the people of Fort Myers were shocked by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. On December 8, 1941, they awaited word from the President. Local businessmen habitually visited Smith’s newsstand on First Street to listen to news broadcasts and “Lum and Abner” on Fort Myers’ one radio station, WINK. A thin drizzle of rain was falling as everyone stopped what they were doing at 12:30 p.m. to crowd around radios in newsstands and stores to hear President Franklin D. Roosevelt address a joint session of Congress. At Smith’s more than the usual group of people listened in silence to the President as he asked Congress to declare war.
Following the speech, the national anthem was played. After standing for the anthem, some people left Smith’s to return to their jobs without comment. Others stayed to hear what Congress would do. Those who remained also did not comment. News broadcasts in those days usually produced many an opinion, lively debates and a wisecrack or two. However, the President’s call for a declaration of war produced silence and serious expressions on the faces of the town's people.9

Nevertheless, optimism persisted and at times bordered on naiveté. The News-Press stated flatly on December 8, 1941, “We will win this war. It might take a few months, it might even take a year, but it will be done.” The News-Press even remained optimistic about the future of tourism, which along with agriculture and fishing constituted the area’s only industries. Prior to the war, Fort Myers tourism consisted of stays of rather long duration, usually all winter. With the development of Fort Myers Beach on Estero Island, short vacation accommodations were being planned just before the start of the war. It was felt that with short vacations now being dictated by wartime restrictions, the tourist industry might still thrive. Furthermore, declared the News-Press, wars caused disruption in people’s lives. Just as dislocations arising out of World War I helped spark the Florida boom of the 1920s, so too World War II might bring a second boom following the cessation of hostilities.10
During the afternoon of December 8, 1941, the Fort Myers Defense Council, under the chairmanship of Pat LeMoyne, met to prepare Fort Myers and Lee County in the wake of the Japanese attack over 4,000 miles away. In addition to LeMoyne, the group consisted of Fort Myers’ Mayor Sam Fitzsimmons, Police Chief Charles Moore, Fire Chief W. L. Anderson and Lee County Sheriff Fred Roberts. The first action of the board was to hire armed guards and post them at the city gas and water plant.

Although conceding that the placement of guards at utility plants was recommended by national and state defense groups, the *Fort Myers News-Press* questioned this action. Noting that money used for this purpose might be better spent on defense bonds or stamps, the editorial stated that “Fort Myers was not New York or San Diego; it is just a small town and would be of no use to the Japs.” The paper further suggested that people or defense organizations “higher up” were thinking of unnecessary things to do in order to perpetuate their own jobs.

The populace, however, apparently felt the need to take some action in order to come to grips with the fact that the nation had been attacked. Most notable was the desire of virtually everyone in the community to join in the war effort in some manner. As a first step, the *Fort Myers News-Press* suggested that local residents purchase defense bonds and stamps and also attend a
patriotic rally scheduled for December 13, 1941, at Terry Park. Above all, the *News-Press* cautioned against any impulsive actions out of fear.\(^{13}\)

Fear, however, apparently motivated at least one reported incident. O. A. Koepp, a German-born resident, was arrested by Deputy Sheriff Abe Skinner on December 9, 1941. Koepp lived in a shanty on Estero Island, and since his nationality was known, he had been under surveillance by Skinner. Packing all of his belongings in his sixteen-foot sailboat, Koepp had set sail along the Estero Island coast. Considering this action “suspicious,” Skinner intercepted the sailboat, arrested Koepp and turned him over to the FBI for questioning.\(^{14}\)

On December 13, the patriotic rally was held at Terry Park with the baseball grandstands used to seat the one thousand people who turned out. The rally featured speeches by members of the Fort Myers Defense Council and a keynote address by J. S. Gillentine, President of Intercounty Telephone and Telegraph Company which provided telephone service to Fort Myers at the time. Gillentine denounced the Axis powers. Pat LeMoyne, chairman of the Defense Council, announced that registration for defense duty would commence, and he called on the populace to sign up as the war effort had places for everyone. The registrations took place the following day at a meeting of the Defense Council, with Chairman LeMoyne and Mayor Fitzsimmons declaring “everything will be secondary to winning the war.”\(^{15}\)

Local officials soon made it clear that everyone would help whether they wanted to or not. Chief of Police Moore and Sheriff Roberts announced that beginning January 2, 1942, their officers would start picking up all unemployed men under the existing vagrancy laws. “There are too many people loafing around when workers are needed,” Chief Moore indicated. “This is a national emergency. We can’t waste manpower. Right now the farmers need hands. Other jobs are open. I am cooperating with the Defense Council to see that men and women who are able do their part.” According to the field representative of the Works’ Projects Administration (WPA) and the farm employment supervisor, the farm labor shortage was acute in all South Florida.\(^{16}\)

On January 6, Chief Moore and Sheriff Roberts pledged to the Defense Council that all available labor would go into the fields. Although no arrests for vagrancy had yet been made, officers had investigated available labor. “We will do these fellows a favor to see that they go to work,” said Chief Moore. “We will see that the potato crop gets harvested.”\(^{17}\) On January 7, five unemployed men were placed on jobs by the farm employment office. The first arrests were made on January 8, when two elderly men were charged under the vagrancy laws. Although a justice of the peace found the pair too old to be sent to the fields, the arrests spurred many of the unemployed to seek jobs in the potato fields.\(^{18}\)

Answering the United States’ call for more food, Lee County farmers increased production to “help win the war.” Some growers added new fields, and others converted gladiola fields to vegetable production. According to the county agent, the federal government had called for an increase in Lee County’s vegetable production from 3,200 to 4,446 acres and an increase in Irish potato production from 1,000 to 1,200 acres. The agent promised the quotas would be met because “to a man, the farmers of this county are making a patriotic response to this appeal to win the war.”\(^{19}\) Although threats of arrest and a sense of patriotic duty spurred many of the unemployed to seek agricultural work, the new acreage demanded even more workers. As a
result, WPA workers building an airport for Fort Myers were temporarily released to work in the potato fields.\textsuperscript{20}

Civil defense also became a high priority. In addition to the already formed Defense Council, an auxiliary corps of firefighters was organized by Fire Chief Anderson. This corps was composed of volunteers who were trained and kept in readiness in case of air raids or other war-related emergencies. The original call, issued by Chief Anderson on January 5, 1942, was answered by only thirteen volunteers. Disappointed, he issued another appeal two days later for at least one hundred more men. In addition, he mailed cards to those who had listed themselves during defense duty registration as having firefighting experience. These cards brought many volunteers, eventually filling the one-hundred-man quota which the chief had set.\textsuperscript{21}

Air raid wardens were also trained, and the city prepared for its first blackout. This was an entirely new experience for the population of Lee County, as it must have been for the rest of the nation. Driving in blackouts was a particularly difficult experience. The Florida Safety Council issued a warning that noted more people had been killed and injured by traffic accidents during blackouts in England than had been killed by German bombs. The safety council advised drivers to sit in the car before starting to drive to get their eyes accustomed to total darkness and also recommended against gazing at one spot while driving because total darkness coupled with an intense gaze would cause drowsiness.\textsuperscript{22}

As the city awaited its first blackout in January 1942, the \textit{News-Press} declared that “Fort Myers Wants In.” The newspaper stated that people in the area seemed more eager for a taste of war than they were anxious to avoid its consequences. Some actually protested a Chamber of Commerce advertisement that called Fort Myers the safest winter resort in the country. Everyone seemed to want to do something, “preferably fight a Jap.” The \textit{News-Press} suggested that since that was not possible, perhaps a blackout would do for excitement. Noting that Fort Myers had been left out of an earlier blackout of eleven counties in the vicinity of MacDill Air Base in Tampa, the editorial complained, “Lakeland and Ocala are not likely to be bombed either, so why should the interceptor command leave us out of the war?”\textsuperscript{23}

Anticipation mounted as the time for the first blackout approached. The chairman of the Air Raid Protection Committee listed several “Don’ts” in the \textit{News-Press}. These included not waiting until the last minute to prepare homes for a blackout, not calling the telephone company or civil defense headquarters, not driving and, above all, not assuming that this was “just a rehearsal.” Although the time was given in advance for the first blackout, subsequent ones were unannounced and considered “real.” The rules stated that no lights were to be visible from the sky from 9 to 9:30 p.m. on the night of January 28, 1942. The forty air raid wardens for Lee County were to report any lights seen during that period. As the blackout occurred, the only lights visible were the red globe atop the city water tower, a brightly illuminated barge on the river and far off railroad signals. The blackout was declared a complete success with the only detraction being the heart attack of an eighty-three-year-old man who died at the sound of the siren.\textsuperscript{24}

Not everyone agreed with the feasibility of blackouts. Following the first one, the \textit{News-Press} claimed that blackouts were “bunk,” unless some way could be found to dim “Florida’s justly
famous moon.” The Caloosahatchee River rippled in the bright moonlight on the night of January 28, outlining Fort Myers “practically as light as day.” The editorial further pointed out that towns in England were bombed daily regardless of blackouts, and on the basis of that experience and the bright moonlight in Fort Myers, the News-Press suggested that the populace spend less time on “the futile arts of hiding out and devote more attention to learning what to do when a raid took place.”

“Dimout” orders were issued for the southwest Florida coastline on July 9, 1942. In an effort to keep shore lighting from silhouetting ships and making them easier targets for enemy submarines, restrictions applied to all lighting ten miles or less from the coast and to cities of 5,000 or more people and located within a distance of thirty miles from the coast. Prohibited lighting included illustrated signs, floodlights illuminating buildings and monuments and lighting for night athletic events. Headlights on cars facing seaward within 500 yards of the coastline were prohibited, and spotlights and high-beam headlights within that area were also disallowed. At first, the only inconvenience from dimouts appeared to be the changing of baseball and football games to daylight hours. The News-Press called the dimout regulations far more sensible than the air raid blackouts and indicated that little or no inconvenience should result.

However, the News-Press later reversed itself In an editorial entitled “Dimout Dangers,” the newspaper pointed out in March 1943 that several traffic accidents had occurred as a result of the dimout, and the editorial asked, “To what purpose are we suffering this jeopardy? It has something to do with submarines and air raids. . . . Many people have decided that dimouts are not of any use.” In a question aimed at civil defense officials, the News-Press demanded, “What are we supposed to do, sit home in fear and trembling of an air raid or be brave and ride the streets to scrape fenders in the dimout?” Moreover, the paper argued that “the county as a whole has probably suffered more loss of life and property damage as a result of air raid precautions than we would in a token raid. . . . As Fort Myers is hardly a token target and as shipping lines are too far away for even the brightest headlights to reach, it is clear that we are risking the persons of our citizens and wasting time which could very well be put to some useful purpose.”

Another controversy arose with Sheriff Roberts’ call in March 1942 for everyone who owned a high powered rifle to register with him. “I want every man to have a chance to do his patriotic duty in case the Japs come,” declared the sheriff. The News-Press immediately labeled Roberts’ action as the most sensible of all the civilian defense measures taken. Comparing a possible invasion of the Lee County coast with the Japanese invasion of Java, the newspaper noted that in the vanguard of the Japanese invasion were bicycle troops and that Roberts’ riflemen could harass these troops, gaining time for a military defense force to be deployed. Although a decision banded down by Florida Attorney General Tom Watson charged the county sheriff with responsibility for defense in the absence of military forces, General A. H. Blanding of the State Defense Council openly criticized Sheriff Roberts’ action. General Blanding stated that civilians untrained in army methods would simply be massacred. According to General Blanding, the army did the fighting, and civilians should stay out of it. Moreover, captured soldiers would be treated as prisoners of war, but civilians were not accorded such courtesy under the rules of war. The News-Press suggested to the State Defense Council that General Blanding’s theories were outdated, that the Japanese and Germans had invaded by infiltration
and that civilian riflemen were the perfect answer for temporary engagement with such an enemy. 29

Ten major rationing programs were introduced nationally by the Office of Price Administration in 1942. Different purposes were served by the various restrictions. For example, tires were rationed due to the rubber shortage, gasoline because of the tire shortage, coffee because of the diversion of ocean shipping, canned food because of the shortage of tin, and shoes because of competing military needs. Local boards administered the program under the theory that decisions of prestigious local people would be more difficult to challenge. 30

When rationing became a reality in January 1942, the Lee County Tire Rationing Board was created. Applications to purchase new tires and tubes were furnished to all dealers in Lee County. A procedure was implemented whereby applications were filled out at the dealer of the purchaser’s choice and then counter-signed at Sanders Brothers Tire Company which inspected the old tires to ascertain that replacement was necessary. The co-signed application was then presented to the Lee County Tire Rationing Board. If the request was approved by the board, a certificate was issued allowing the consumer to buy the new tires. Non-residents were required to follow the same procedure except their requests had to be ruled upon by the State Tire Rationing Board in Tallahassee. The monthly quota for Lee County was set at forty tires and thirty-three tubes for passenger cars, motorcycles and light trucks and 101 tires and eighty-four tubes for trucks and buses. New tires, not allowed for pleasure vehicles, were reserved for cars operated by physicians, nurses, veterinarians and vehicles used to maintain fire, police, public health, safety and mail services. Trucks used in most commercial enterprises were allowed new tires as were buses. 31

New automobile purchasing was also rationed effective January 1, 1942. The first permit to buy a new car was issued to the Fort Myers Police Department on March 5 to purchase a Ford sedan for patrol duty. Procedure for the purchase of new cars required the showing of need and was limited to physicians, nurses, veterinarians, ministers, essential community services, transportation to jobs crucial to defense or the war effort, government workers, newspaper delivery and farm and produce delivery services. 32

In October 1942, Victor Hough of Hough Chevrolet Company accepted chairmanship of the Nationwide Victory Service League which promoted conservation of existing automobile transporation. “We must all take responsibility to keep what cars and trucks are available in good condition so they can serve the nation for the duration,” Hough stated. The league urged all car owners to join the organization, study books on the care of cars and make their equipment last as long as possible. 33

A complicated system of gasoline rationing also began in January 1942, and it was superseded by a more efficient system seven months later. All owners of passenger cars and motorcycles were required to register for the “A” and “D” gasoline ration books during July 1942. “A” cards were for cars and “D” cards for motorcycles. Only basic ration books containing forty-eight coupons worth four gallons each were offered. If a person felt that he could not operate his automobile on sixteen gallons per month, he could apply to the Lee County Rationing Board for consideration. However, the board chairman stated that it would be very difficult to obtain more
gasoline than allowed. Only in the event that no ride-sharing arrangements could be made or access to a bus line was impossible would exceptions be granted. Truck, bus, taxi, and boat owners had to register for special rationing books. Those who qualified were issued “B” cards which were supplementary cards.  

Sugar and coffee were also rationed. Since the area produced a rather large quantity of honey, this became a quick and easy sugar substitute. Some ingenuity was shown in selection of coffee substitutes. In October 1942, it was reported that four of the six major grocery stores in Fort Myers were completely out of coffee and prospects looked dim for any deliveries. However, a substitute brew, trademarked “Hollywood Cup,” appeared. This was a combination of figs, barley and bran which, according to one grocer, “looked like coffee, had a kindred odor and had particles about the size of coffee grounds.” It cost thirty-five cents per pound but was advertised to “go twice as far as coffee.”

Rationing of meat and poultry caused a black market to thrive in Lee County. The News-Press reported that an increasing proportion of the choice grades of beef and pork and practically all poultry was being marketed through “various devious channels” to circumvent price and ration controls. Plenty of steak was available on the black market at eighty or eighty-five cents per pound as was chicken at seventy-five cents per pound against the official price ceiling of thirty-nine cents per pound. Although the shortages were not as acute as in New York, where half-block-long lines waited at butcher shops, the News-Press made the point that housewives found obeying the law difficult in view of the flourishing black market.

Among things taken for granted today which caused problems during the war was the advent of Daylight Savings Time. Controversy followed a federal government announcement that it would commence on February 9, 1942. Although the announcement indicated that all official clocks were to be moved ahead one hour, several segments of the population resisted and remained on Eastern Standard Time. The change meant that children would have to get ready and board school buses before daylight. Farmers felt they could not begin work before sunrise or lose an hour of work. The school board split on the issue with the school superintendent favoring Eastern Standard Time and the school board chairman supporting Eastern Daylight Time. The school board reached a compromise which allowed the schools to remain on standard time for six weeks and then switch to daylight time. Apparently, controversy raged over this issue, because the News-Press tried to diffuse the situation by pointing out that there was no “lack of patriotism” in opposing the change and no “attempt to interfere with God’s works” by supporting it. The final result was local acceptance of the compromise by the school system and the changing of time by all except the Slater Lumber Mill and the farmers.

The most important wartime changes in Lee County resulted from the location of two U.S. Army Air Corps Bases. The Buckingham Gunnery School eventually brought some 20,000 men and women, and the conversion of Page Field into a base for bombers attracted another 5,000 military personnel. 

On January 18, 1942, a board of U.S. Army officers, led by Lieutenant Colonel W. A. Maxwell, arrived from Tyndall Field at Panama City, Florida, to inspect potential sites for an airfield in Lee County. The proposed camp was called a “flexible gunnery school” and would
As part of gasoline rationing, a national campaign urged drivers to organize ride-sharing.

Photograph from Propaganda: The Art of Persuasion by Anthony Rhodes.
duplicate the one located at Panama City. Two tracts were needed, one from 2,000 to 3,000 acres for headquarters and another six by eight miles for a firing range. Originally it was designed for a station of 3,000 men and 1,400 students with 300 to 400 officers. Colonel Maxwell said that because of the large expenditure in building the camp and the benefits its presence would bring to Lee County, it was expected that the county would acquire the necessary land either by purchase or lease. Initially, Colonel Maxwell showed interest in three sites: Buckingham, a second one north of Pine Island Road and west of the Tamiami Trail and a third southwest of Fort Myers in the Iona area. After viewing the sites, Colonel Maxwell ruled out Buckingham and the site southwest of town, leaving only the site north of the river for consideration. Buckingham was initially ruled out because eleven miles of new roads would have to be built to the site. However, the group of officers reversed themselves and selected the Buckingham site on January 20. The chief consideration in selecting Buckingham over the site north of the river was better drainage because the elevation was higher. Colonel Maxwell declared that the monthly payroll at the camp would be $300,000, and he felt that the camp could be in operation by August 1, 1942.39

The Lee County Commission and the Fort Myers City Council moved quickly. On January 21, the two groups agreed unanimously to acquire 75,000 acres of land at a cost of $3,750 per year on a lease from Consolidated Land Company and Babcock-Carrier Land Company. In March the county commission and the city council took steps to acquire outright 4,160 acres for the headquarters post. County Commissioner Harry Stringfellow was the prime motivator and negotiator in dealing with the army on the air base. Given the needs expressed by the army, Stringfellow realized early that there really were no other areas in the state that could be utilized for these purposes.40

Many people in Fort Myers were elated. The experience of Panama City showed dramatically increased business activity as a result of its gunnery school. Rosy predictions were made, some of which came true. For Fort Myers it would mean 300 to 400 more houses rented all year round, in addition to all of the jobs related to serving these residences. Obviously many retail stores would benefit, but among the predictions which never materialized were the expectations that “Alva will blossom out into a town with a picture show and a mayor; the four corners at Olga will become busy with trade and the one business building at Buckingham will mushroom into a settlement gay with bright lights.”41

Some of the local population remained dubious about the new air base, fearing that it would change the character of the town. These people felt that instead of remaining an eminently respectable tourist city, Fort Myers would become a hectic army post with loud shooting and bombing. Information provided by the army indicated that this would be a flexible gunnery school; that is, schooling would focus on the relatively small caliber arms used for flexible firing from aircraft. These weapons had ranges of only approximately seven miles and were not unusually noisy. Moreover, proponents of the base pointed out that army air force pay was higher than that of the regular army and the students would be selected, making for a higher caliber serviceman than might be found at a regular army base.42

Lee County officials also facilitated the use of Page Field as an air base. On February 9, 1942, the manager of the Fort Myers airport met with officers from MacDill Field in Tampa.
inspection of the airport, they met with Lee County Commission Chairman Stringfellow and Fort Myers Mayor Fitzsimmons. Stringfellow announced that the air force sought a location for a bombardment squadron of 2,000 men and 250 officers. Stringfellow told the visiting army officers that the county would make the airport available if it were approved by army air force authorities.43

The army asked for 600 additional acres which were quickly provided. One half of the desired land was owned by Henry Pearce and W. Ashton Smith, and both agreed to lease their land immediately to the county for one dollar per year. Pearce and Smith asked the out-of-state owners of the remaining half of the land to donate their land on the same terms. With their agreement Chairman Stringfellow signed a lease consigning the land to the United States government on February 19. Citing Pearce and Smith as the “two good citizens that had made the deal possible,” Stringfellow introduced a motion which was approved by the county commission reimbursing the owners for property taxes on the land. The army sent a personnel officer to Fort Myers in March 1942 to investigate housing and recreation facilities for troops to be stationed there. Although he asked not to be quoted, word leaked out that comments were made to the effect that “there ought to be a good opening here for journeymen painters and dealers in lawn mowers.” One real estate agent was asked, “What do you do, show prospects these houses in the night time? Inside they’re fine but outside they look like something the cat
wouldn't drag in.” Apparently “beautiful Fort Myers” was not seen that way by army officers at that time, and the News-Press took homeowners to task for not painting their houses and giving the town a bad image.  

Approximately 650 men from the 98th Bombardment Group transferred from Barksdale Field, Louisiana, in late March and occupied tents at Page Field Airport. The first troops lost little time in nicknaming the facility “Palmetto Field,” as a result of the extensive work necessary in removing the tough palmetto roots. Perhaps other unprintable names were assigned to the air base after a plague of petriculosus humainus (bedbugs) infested the camp in May and all buildings had to be evacuated for two weeks and steamed. Servicemen also reported that mosquitoes were “terrible all the time.”

The first troops arrived at the Buckingham Air Base in early June 1942. However, construction work at the base was not completed until September. Roughly 2,400 workers were employed to construct the air base, and local merchants indicated that their business had increased from 200 to 300 percent as a result of the base.

Many servicemen stationed at the two army air bases in Fort Myers returned after the war to settle in the area. Some became prominent citizens. Oscar Corbin, a native of Kentucky, was a
gunnery instructor at Buckingham. Citing the friendliness he found among the residents as well as the apparent potential for business in Lee County, he returned and opened a feed store and garden center in Fort Myers. He was elected Mayor of Fort Myers in 1967 and was re-elected in 1972.47

Carl Creel, a white officer, commanded a company of black troops at Buckingham. Creel later stated that while stationed at Maxwell Field, Alabama, the black troops had had six commanders in five weeks in early 1942. When asked if he would volunteer to take command of the troops, Creel refused, but he was ordered to take command of them after their transfer to Fort Myers. Creel indicated that they became a “fine outfit” and formed the first musical band at Buckingham. Subsequently, other bands were formed, and contests were held. The band from Creel’s troops won them all. Creel returned to Fort Myers following the war and operated a highly successful independent insurance agency for many years.48

John Beckett was a fighter pilot instructor at Page Field. Beckett recalled that “people in the area were wonderful.” He stayed with the Walter Moody family during the war, and Thelma

The setting for practice at the truck-mounted shooting range gives some idea of the primitive conditions at Buckingham Air Base.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.
Moody introduced him to Thelma Ireland, who became his wife. Beckett returned to the area upon his discharge from service and acquired a Gulf Oil distributorship. He became chairman of the Lee Memorial Hospital Board and later served on the Lee County School Board.  

Otis Campbell, a native of Pennsylvania, first, saw the southwest Florida area as a serviceman at Buckingham. Falling in love with the area, he returned following his discharge to become associated with a highly successful independent insurance adjusting firm.

Any account of army life would be incomplete without an anecdote concerning governmental inefficiency. A. W. D. Harris of Fort Myers, also stationed in Fort Myers during the war, recalls a shipment of army tanks that were all unloaded on First Street. Only then was it discovered that the tanks were destined for the army post of Fort Myers, Virginia, approximately one hundred miles from where the tanks were manufactured.

Victory in Europe (VE) Day was celebrated in Fort Myers by the closing of business places, public offices and schools on May 8, 1945. Mayor Dave Shapard, however, issued a special
request for restaurants to stay open, and they complied. Victory in Japan (VJ) Day celebrations began on the night of August 14, 1945 and continued through August 15 with a victory parade.52

On September 30, 1945, Buckingham Air Base was closed as was Page Field Air Base. While met with mixed feelings in the area, conversion to peacetime proceeded swiftly. Buckingham became headquarters for the Lee County Mosquito Control, and a fleet of planes for this purpose still uses the runways and facilities left from the war days. Page Field was returned to county control and served as the area’s only commercial airport until 1983. Today it is a private airport, and the barracks built during the war have become private homes and businesses.53

Tourism, the major industry in Fort Myers today, suffered during World War II, but it soon recovered and expanded. Estimates indicate that 2.5 million tourists entered Florida annually during 1939-1941. Although no figures are available for the war, tourism for the next four years was negligible due to wartime restrictions on travel and gasoline rationing. However, 1946 saw an estimated 4.5 million tourists visit Florida, and the number steadily expanded with Fort Myers attracting many new visitors.54

The anticipated real estate boom began even before the end of the war. Transactions for the week of April 15, 1945, were the most spectacular since the boom year of 1926. The George Judd holdings north of the river, for example, sold for $100 per acre. All over the county, tracts large and small began to sell, as the end of the war drew closer.55

Population growth following the war was spectacular. From 10,604 inhabitants in 1940, Fort Myers grew to 13,195 in 1950 and 22,523 in 1960. The Lee County population, which stood at 17,488 in 1940, expanded to 23,404 in 1950 and had mushroomed to 54,539 by 1960.56

During the war years the building industry in Fort Myers was practically dormant. Following the war, however, construction activity became feverish. Building permits amounted to $394,560 in 1945, but the value had risen to $806,633 in 1946. The year 1947 saw the largest total value of building permits since the boom days--$1,429,705. A one-million-dollar bond issue was approved by the voters of Lee County on May 25, 1946, for the construction of schools. By 1948, the number of children in Lee County public schools numbered 4,325 as compared to 3,224 ten years earlier.57

The advent of the air age in Fort Myers was heralded by the News-Press in July 1945. Citing the development of the railroad and the automobile as harbingers of earlier booms, the newspaper predicted the commercial airplane would be the carrier of the postwar boom. “The destiny of south Florida is to become the great winter market basket of 100 million Americans who live in wintry latitudes,” noted the editorial which envisioned a skyway express service carrying flowers, fruits and vegetables to northern markets within six hours. The editorial closed with the hope that, unlike the boom of the 1920s, postwar expansion would bring healthy, steady growth.58

This proved to be the case. Fort Myers and Lee County would never be the same as a result of World War II. The period surely stands as a watershed in the area’s history.
1 *Fort Myers News Press*, November 21, 1984; Fort Myers Planning Department, Historic Fort Myers (Fort Myers: Fort Myers Planning Department, 1982), 12.


3 *Fort Myers News Press*, October 11, 1941.

4 Ibid., October 12, 1941.

5 Ibid., September 17, 30, 1941.

6 Ibid., October 5, 1941.

7 Ibid., November 16, 1941.

8 Ibid., October 13, 1941.

9 Ibid., December 9, 1941.

10 Ibid., December 8, 10, 1941.

11 Ibid., December 8, 1941.

12 Ibid., December 9, 1941.

13 Ibid., December 11, 1941.

14 Ibid., December 10, 1941.

15 Ibid., December 13, 14, 1941.

16 Ibid., January 1, 1942.

17 Ibid., January 7, 1942.

18 Ibid., January 8-10, 1942.

19 Ibid., January 6, 1942.

20 Ibid., January 9, 1942.

21 Ibid., January 6, 1942.

22 Ibid., January 4, 28, 1942.

23 Ibid., January 4, 1942.

24 Ibid., January 25, 29, 1942.

25 Ibid., January 30, 1942.

26 Ibid., July 9, 10, 1942.

27 Ibid., March 26, 1943.
28 Ibid., March 3, 1942.
29 Ibid., March 5, 14, 1942.
31 *Fort Myers News Press*, January 6, 1942.
32 Ibid., March 5, 1942.
33 Ibid., October 17, 1942.
34 Ibid., July 8, 1942.
35 Ibid., October 17, 1942.
36 Ibid., May 17, 1945.
37 Ibid., February 4, 5, 6 (quotation), 10, 1942.
39 Ibid., January 19-21, 1942.
40 Ibid., January 22, 24, 1942.
41 Ibid., March 5, 1942.
42 Ibid., January 25, 1942.
43 Ibid., February 10, 1942.
44 Ibid., February 19, March 16, 1942.
45 “History of Page Field,” 1, 12, located in United States Air Force Historical Research Center, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama.
47 “Over Here,” 1986 video, located in Fort Myers Historical Museum, Fort Myers, Florida.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
51 “Over Here.”
53 Ibid., September 8, 1945.
