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TRAINING AT TAMPA'S DREW FIELD DURING WORLD WAR II: AN ORAL MEMOIR

by Dena Montero*

Bailey Lee (my grandfather) was born on August 17, 1921, in Esther, Louisiana. He joined the Army on September 11, 1940, at the age of nineteen. He served in the army for five years and was stationed at Drew Field in Tampa, Florida, for approximately two years. In 1945, his service with the army ended and he settled with his family in Tampa. He worked as a tile setter until he retired a few years ago. He has one daughter (my mother) and three sons. His wife passed away ten years ago, and he still lives in the house where he raised his family. The following interview gives his account of his experiences in World War II and life at Drew Field. The material for this oral history comes from two interviews conducted on June 17 and August 7, 1990.

Q: How did you get into the Army?

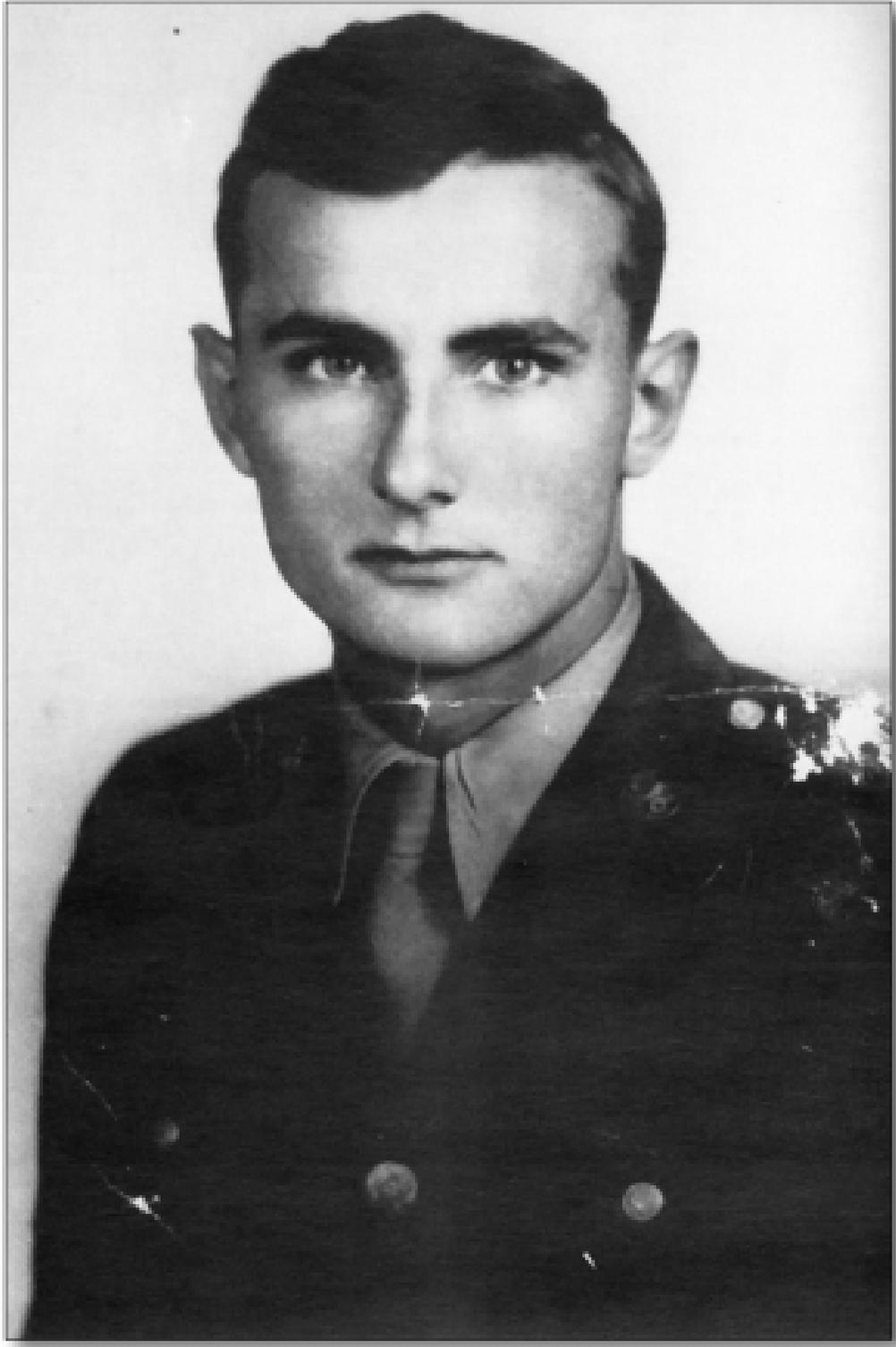
A: It was 1940, and I was listening to the radio over at my neighbor's house and reading the magazines. The Germans were moving out. I figured, well, I'll have to go, and if I have to go, I'd better go in there now and get some training. I was nineteen and living in Louisiana. I enlisted the 12th of September 1940, and signed on for the 309th Signal Company to be stationed at the New Orleans Air Base. We were attached to the 3rd Bomb Wing. (There was no Air Force then; it was the Army Air Corps.) The air base wasn't ready, so they sent us to Barksdale Field in Shreveport, Louisiana. There we took basic training, and boy, they drilled the hell out of us for a week – close order drill. If there was something we were supposed to know, they'd give us a few hours instruction in it – like the 45 was our principal side arm – we had one whole afternoon of that. The corporal, went off and had a few beers or something, so we didn't get much instruction, but most of us were country boys, and we knew weapons. Then the New Orleans Air Base was ready for us. They'd been working around the clock on it. Construction lights all over the place – my outfit got the job of taking down the civilian lights. They had us taking down lights the contractors were supposed to take down.

There we got in some pretty good training, and then I got shipped off to Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, to some cotton-picking school – there's so many of them I don't remember how many schools. From there, I came back to New Orleans, and on December 7, the day of infamy, I was in charge of quarters. I was in the orderly room taking phone calls, making sure nobody burned up the barracks, and we got that first announcement that the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.

Q: What was that like?

A: Everybody was stunned, and I told them, "Look, that means we're in a war and any of you want to go to town, you'd better get the hell out of here now because I don't know when you're going to get out." Everybody grabbed a pass and went to town except this one guy, and I said,

* The author wishes to thank Dr. Cecil B. Currey, who encouraged publication of this memoir after it was written for one of his history courses at the University of South Florida.



Bailey Lee during World War II.

Photograph courtesy of Bailey Lee.

“Hey, aren't you going to town?” and he said, “No!” I said, “O.K., you be in charge of the quarters, I'm going to town!” By midnight, all hell was breaking loose downtown. All servicemen had to report back to the base – we were all in civilian clothes then, but they could tell a dog face a mile off. Finally, about three o'clock in the morning after repeated warnings, I decided to go back to the base because they told me, “We tell you one more time and you're going to the guard house,” and I didn't want any part of that. The day after Christmas in 1941, we convoyed my outfit to Drew Field in Tampa.

Q: What was it like there?

A: Well, I'll tell you what – when we found out we were coming to Drew Field from New Orleans Air Base, we were very much perturbed, because we'd seen airmen who'd been sergeants and they left as Grade A privates just to get away from MacDill in Tampa. And they told us MacDill was heavenly compared to Drew Field. They were right – Drew was pure hell. I was lucky, having been a bull frog and turtle hunter when I was nine and ten years old, and by the time I was eleven, I was an alligator hunter, so I was used to a rough life.

Drew Field had a landing strip. Of course the whole thing was being built up: Dale Mabry was being built when we came here. Dale Mabry Highway was built to connect Drew Field and MacDill Field for military purposes.

We came into the most disorganized mess I ever saw. They threw us in with some other companies because there wasn't any room for us. We were occupying their tents, and there were about eighteen of us in three tents on one end of the company street. The Charge of Quarters (CQ), whose job it was to get everybody out of bed at reveille, came in the first morning that we were there and told us, “Get out!” The guys told him what they were going to do to him if he didn't get away from there. He went and told the first sergeant, and one of our men was up there at the orderly tent. First sergeant said, “You'd better not mess with those guys, they're tough.” We kind of took advantage of that. We checked out trucks and did stuff like go to the beaches, fight like heck with toll collectors on Gandy. We heard there was a brewery in Ybor City. We'd go there and they'd give us a tour of the brewery, and then we'd go to the tap room and they'd keep filling those glasses until we'd turn them upside down! But they split us up – a whole bunch of us.

Drew Field was a tent city. You could get six people in each tent. Five worked better, but you could get six in them. They had dirt floors. Latrines weren't built in a lot of sections. What we used for a latrine would be a straddle trench, which is a trench dug right out there in the open. You'd put one foot on one side of the trench, and the other foot on the other side, and use the toilet. Kind of unappetizing when there were a bunch of guys that had to go at the same time, and that happened a lot! They had wooden mess halls. I don't know if everyone had them, but we were lucky because we had access to a wooden mess hall. We had problems with food. I saw one company that ate in the mess hall next to the one I ate in – the whole company came down with food poisoning one night. Anybody that ate in that mess hall that night went to the hospital or they were very sick. Mess halls seemed to take predominance, and then the latrines, and then came the supply rooms where our supplies were kept.



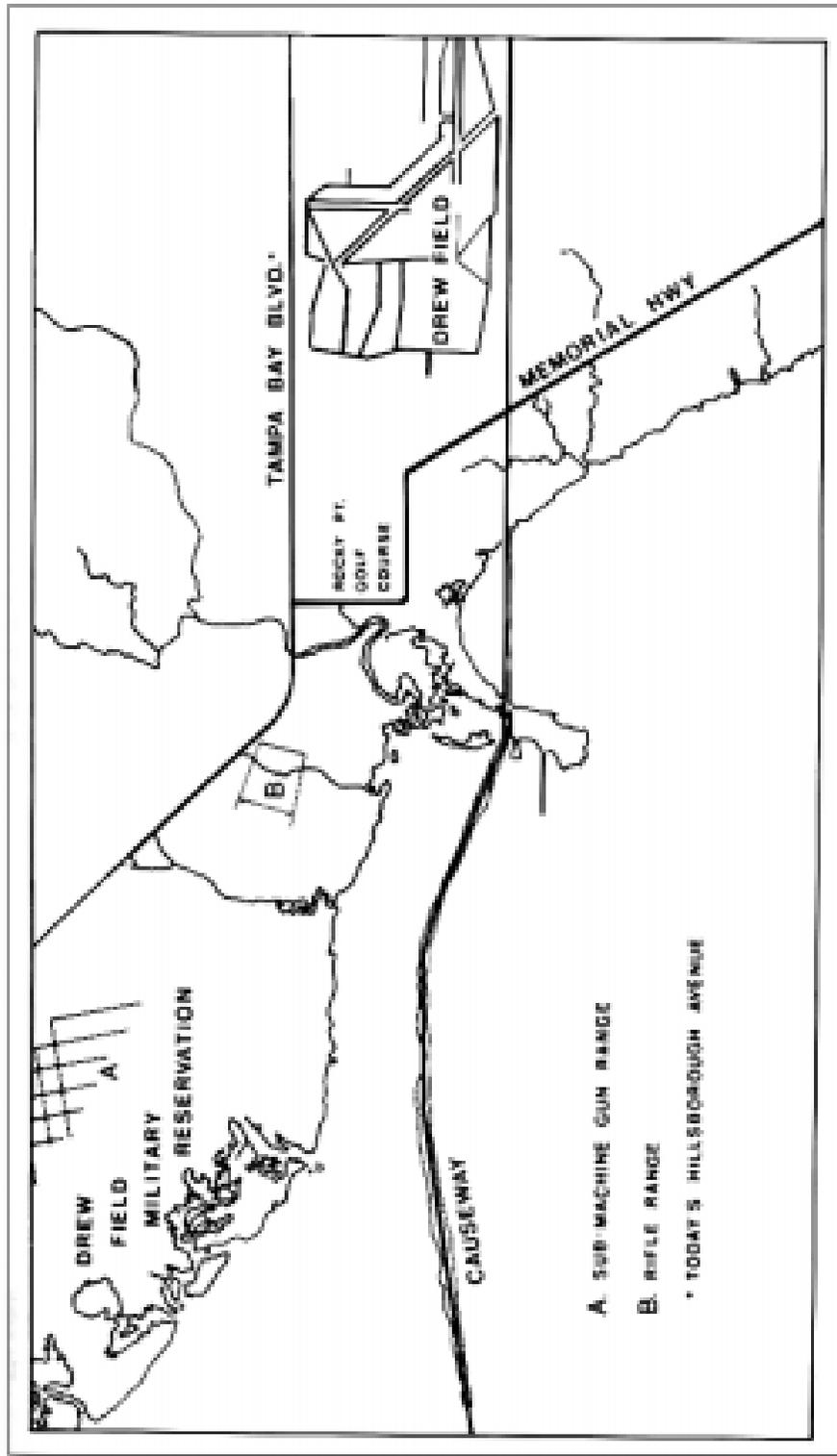
Tents at Drew Field.

Photograph courtesy of Bailey Lee.

There were orange trees all over the place. Old man Drew had his orange groves out there, and his mansion was out there. It was a beautiful thing. And there were several permanent buildings – brick buildings – that old man Drew had built, I presume, for members of his family. Of course, they were grabbed off for offices. But company offices were generally in tents. We finally got wooden buildings built for them. We didn't build them though.

Electricity was available, but they couldn't or wouldn't get it to us. So I got a couple of the boys and some rolls of telephone wire. Now the telephone wire was a heavy duty field wire – two strands – and would you believe I wired tents with that stuff? We'd splice into it at the top of the tent, drop the strip of wire down in there, and we'd hang or screw in a socket in there. You'd screw the bulb in when you wanted light, and unscrew it when you didn't want light. It was funny, one guy had a radio – we wanted to hear the music, but we didn't have a receptacle – so we cut the plug off the wire, and spliced it directly into the line. But the radio couldn't be shut off. You could turn it down low to where you couldn't hear it, but then at night when the signal got stronger, it'd play all night long!

Sanitation was a horror. They had showers, but the water was horrible. I don't know what caused it. That water tasted awful, and it wasn't sulphur. The rumor was that they screwed up and hooked up the water line to the sewer line. I went to a party, and boy, did I hit a raw nerve, because the engineer in charge of the water was at the party, and he got a whole lot upset. He went on to explain how a sewer line wouldn't hold water pressure, and blah, blah, blah. Like I



The location of Drew Field on the northern shore of Old Tampa Bay in 1945.

Map by Miles Pennington.



Soldier wiring a tent with electricity.

Photograph courtesy of Bailey Lee.

said, us country boys did well, and a lot of city boys did well, but a lot of them couldn't take it and there were suicides. They'd go out there in the orange groves and hang themselves.

Q: Why were they doing that?

A: They couldn't take it – the living conditions, their girl friends back home. It didn't bother me because I came out of the swamps of Louisiana, and I was used to a rough life. It wasn't half bad to me, but to them it was horrifying. And one morning a cook I knew – they'd get up at three in the morning, take a shower, and report to the mess hall. They'd work till usually about nine or ten at night, but then they had two days and nights off. Anyway, Old Hoover staggered into the latrine three quarters asleep, and something hit him in the face, and he backed off and looked up, and there was a guy that had hung himself up in the rafters. He'd run into the guy's feet – his shoes. That was about the time a story came out that Walter Winchell had said, "If your son's in the Pacific, write to him; if he's at Drew Field, pray for him." And that hit a raw nerve with the C.O. out there, but everybody was having problems.

Training for pilots was just one big hurry. Get them airborne, and get them to where they can go out and fight. And we were always losing planes. MacDill had a saying, "One a day in Tampa Bay," but we had a lot more than one a day in Tampa Bay. I saw three of them go down one day at Drew Field. They were those P-39's, I think, with the tricycle landing gear. They'd take off and start climbing, and the motor would cut off. Naturally, you'd stop everything you were doing and watch them. A bomber went down on Ivy Street. Those bombers were out on anti-submarine patrol, and thank God that one wasn't armed. The thing caught fire, and they couldn't get the

people out of there. There was a guy who I presume was a gunner in the back end. He kept screaming, "Get me out, I'm burning alive," and they couldn't get him out. Now, I didn't see this, but I was told about it. All this stuff was hush, hush. We didn't want to be of aid and comfort to the enemy.

I wound up in an outfit called the 9th Fighter Command Signal Corps. I was always attached to the Army Air Corps – there was no Air Force then. And we started getting serious about our training.

An officer I'd known a couple of years before came by one afternoon. He said, "How do you like it here Lee?" I said, "I don't like it one damn bit," and he said, "You want out? I can get you out of here." I said, "I'll take it." He said, "You won't come back." I said, "I'll take it." He said, "I'll see you in the morning." That night, they told us to write home and tell everybody to forget about getting in touch with us, and we'd get in touch with the family whenever – and we had to send all our civilian stuff home. That night, they put us on a train heading west. We got to New Orleans, and they stopped us. As it turned out, I saw this same officer a year later. I said, "Hey Captain, what did I volunteer for back then?" He said, "Well, you volunteered to jump into Bataan. Parachute into Bataan." I thought, "Oh hell, death march."

Q: Where is Bataan?

A: It's out there in the Pacific. Bataan and the Japs were bad, bad, bad. The death march was horrifying. And not many people came back from that part.

So, we got to New Orleans, and they told us, "You can go to town tonight – be back here at daylight. It's your last night in the U.S." We celebrated. The next morning, we waited to see what the word would be. That being our last night in New Orleans, we figured we'd be flying somewhere. They came around and told us, "You're not going anywhere. You're going to stay here and train a new company." By then, everybody was getting a little bit nervous about where we were going.

Again, training had gotten real earnest. No more of a week's close order drill, and then maybe 2-3 hours on the 45, and during that 2-3 hours training, the corporal would go off and drink beer and leave us to ourselves. It got serious. And I had a platoon. I think I had the 3rd platoon, and the first sergeant came by and said, "Lee, I'm going to give you 27 moonshiners." And I said, "Thanks, what in the heck are you talking about?" Back then, you could enlist in the Army for a year. If men were caught making moonshine, the judges in the Carolinas asked them, "You want a year in the Army, or a year in prison?" They took the Army, naturally.

Q: So you got these guys?

A: I got 27 of them.

Q: So you were a drill sergeant?

A: Yes, a drill corporal then. So, half of them couldn't read or write, and I figured, boy you're going to have your hands full. They turned out to be the best men I ever trained.

But they shipped us back to Drew Field. We shipped those boys out and the training cadre, the corporal drill sergeants, stayed behind. We started up the 9th Fighter Command. We got that outfit trained, and found out we were shipping overseas. I thought, "Oh well, let's go." But my official job with the company was assistant wire chief, in charge of all the telephone lines and all the installations. Anyhow, somebody came by and said, "You're not shipping." And I said, "The hell I'm not shipping, I'm going." I went to the first sergeant and said, "What the hell is going on here? How come I'm not going?" He said, "You're staying behind to form up a new 9th Fighter Command. We're shipping." He said Chief, the other assistant – he was a Louisiana Indian – was going. I said, "I don't like it. I want to go to headquarters and talk to the colonel about it."



Bailey Lee relaxing in a tent equipped with a wooden floor.

Photograph courtesy of Bailey Lee.

Q: Why? Because you wanted to go?

A: Yes. I wanted to go.

Q: But they kept holding you back to train the others?

A: Yes. So, I went up to headquarters, and they let me in to see the colonel. By then, I was an old hand – I was a sergeant by then. Everybody at Drew Field knew me, and they let me see the colonel, and he said, "Look, we can only ship one assistant wire chief. Chief somehow or another found out about it and he came down here and asked to be shipped." I said, "No fair." He said, "All I can do for you now is, you talk to Chief, and if he'll back off and let you go in his place, then you can go. Otherwise, you'll stay here and form a new 9th Fighter." I went and found Chief. I tried bribing that Indian, tried getting him drunk. I cussed him out, I begged him, I did everything that normally works for me and that son of a gun said, "Hell No!" He was going. But in the meantime, we'd been teaching weapons and that part I loved, because I love guns.

Then they started making progress at Drew. They started putting wooden floors in those tents, building up the sides about three foot out of wood, and man, that was hog heaven! Of course it was the rainy season when I first got in that mess, and we had the alerts – they'd blow that siren at night, and everybody was assigned a certain place to go, and my tent had the hangar. There were five of us in that tent. We had coveralls (we called them alert p.j.'s) back in those days, and we'd go to bed at night, and we'd lay out those p.j.'s where we could dive into them. And we'd

have our shoes there – we wouldn't even wait for socks, we'd just slip into the things, run by the supply room and check out our Chicago typewriters, as the gangsters called them – the old Thompson sub-machine guns. My job was to post sentry on each corner of that hangar – it was the only hangar they had. Anyhow, I'd post a man at each corner, and I was to keep working inside, moving all the time and checking on the guys outside.

We were forming up. We started doing a lot of hiking and camping, and we'd hike out to a lake somewhere or a river. Sometimes we'd come back that same day, and other times we'd stay out there several days. I was usually the noncommissioned officer in charge of everything outside the office. We had all kinds of training out there and we had to have bayonet practice. We'd put the bayonets in the rifles, put the sheaths on them, make sure they were fastened good, and we'd get out there and mix it up. We got our bruises and bumps, but we were training, and a rifle butt up against your head whether you meant it or not, hurt like hell. I remember that, and I see these reenactments of the Civil War with their bayonet drills, and I think, "I don't know if they did it that way in battle, but boy, if they'd have come up against the boys I was training, they'd have been slaughtered!"

We had to swim, and some of the guys near drowned. And there was camouflage stuff – in fact, they'd sent me to camouflage school in South Carolina. I'd come back from camouflage school, and by then, we was uptown – we had a two-story wooden barrack at Drew Field. I got to the company, and there were two men there: one for each barrack to keep the thieves out, and one to keep the fire going. They told me the men were on a field problem near the state park, but the next morning, the mail truck and mess truck would be in to pick up supplies for the kitchen and the mail – I'd ride out on it. That was a lot of fun out there near the state park but cold in January and February, and the only place to clean up was in the river.

Q: Where was this?

A: Right next to the state park. In fact, we used to go over to the state park and shoot the bull with the rangers.

Q: Hillsborough State Park?

A: Yes – and we had a bunch of row boats there. I don't know where they came from, but we had them. And we did a lot of swimming in good weather; in bad weather, we swam anyhow to get cleaned up. We had a base camp with six-man tents, but by then, we found out the hard way, that five men worked a lot better in those tents. Of course, we'd sleep on the ground – roll up in our blankets and sleep on the ground.

Q: At Drew Field?

A: No, out there in the woods near the state park. We were out there for two months. And we had a bunch of officers who'd go to town at night and come back the next day and talk about what a big time they'd had the night before, and we were cussing, "You S.O.B.'s, you go out and have fun and you won't let us leave camp." So there was a meeting of noncoms and the officers, and the first thing when they asked us for suggestions, I said, "Give us passes and let us go to

town. You guys go to town and we don't, and we hear you talking about what a good time you have and we're stuck out here in the woods." So they started giving us a pass every ten days – overnight passes. We'd come in on the mail truck and go back out the next day. We'd sleep in the barracks at Drew to save money. Every time we'd get the sniffles – sneezing and coughing, and we'd go back out in the woods. Sleeping on dirt in the winter time, morale went to hell out there in the woods.

Q: Why were you all taken from Drew Field out to Hillsborough State Park?

A: We needed this training, and there was no room for it at Drew Field. So we went up to the river and river crossings but being out in the woods morale went to hell. Things got so bad that one guy went into the C.O.'s tent and tried to drag him out and beat him up.

Anyhow, they shipped that officer out and brought in another who was good at putting the company together, but it was just too late. They brought that outfit back to Drew Field, and we were split up and shipped all over.

Q: But you stayed at Drew Field?

A: For a while. Before the company broke up, I was a sergeant. They transferred me to the 737th Signal Air Wing which was a commando company. One of the officers I got along well with was reading orders, and he says, "Uh, oh, Sergeant Lee's been transferred from Grade A private to the 737th." I looked at him and said, "You men couldn't find a way to break me." Because I knew my general orders, I knew just how far I could go. He said, "Look, I respected you, and I never gave you any trouble. This is not my doings." So I reported to the new outfit that afternoon, and the first sergeant said, "Aren't you a sergeant?" I said, "I was until those damn orders were cut." He said, "Don't take your stripes off; I'll be right back." He went to headquarters and got it changed.

Q: And where were you transferred from?

A: The 9th Fighter Command to the 737th. That was still in Drew Field. And the first sergeant came back and said, "You keep your stripes. I want you to be ranking duty sergeant around here." I said, "Well, what does that entail?" He said, "You're in charge of everything outside of this office." Within a month's time, I'd been promoted to staff sergeant. I saw those orders, and I



Bailey Lee (left) training a soldier at Drew Field.

Photograph courtesy of Bailey Lee.

went into him and I said, "Sergeant, I want about three hours off this afternoon." He said, "Why?" I said, "I'm going down to the P.X. and getting the brightest neon chevrons I can find because I'm going to parade them all over that damn 9th Fighter Command!" He started laughing and said, "I figured that's what you were going to do – go ahead!"

Q: How were things looking at Drew Field about that time?

A: Getting much better. The suicides were way down. Just about everybody was in wooden barracks by then. We had a rifle range that I would put somewhere about where Eisenhower Boulevard is now.

Q: How big was Drew Field?

A: From Columbus Drive north to Hillsborough Avenue and Dale Mabry Highway west to today's Eisenhower Boulevard. Anyhow, there was a rifle range, and everybody practiced out there. We didn't have too much ammo, but we practiced shooting into targets between us and the pine trees. And the bullets would actually cut those pine trees off. One'd knock a chunk out, and later on, another one'd knock a chunk out because the tree would be lined up with that bulls eye. I also gave them training on the 30 caliber water cooled machine gun. That one has got a tank around the barrel – you had to have water in it or the barrel would burn up. A lot of times in battle, the water would evaporate, and the men would actually urinate in it to keep the barrel cool. Boy, that must have been a good smelling machine gun!

Somebody decided that we needed more room for training because Drew was getting crowded. So they shipped a battalion of us down to Bradenton, and we took over that baseball park down there. Tent city again – and that training got rough. It was commando tactics. There was marksmanship on every kind of weapon we could get our hands on, and there were precious few. Machine guns, pistols, rifles, grenades, they had to know it all. I was down there about six months. My wife came home to Tampa – she was living with me in Bradenton – to have a baby, and we got an apartment. I was still stationed in Bradenton, but I had a place to come to every weekend – our own apartment! That lasted exactly two weeks.

After six months in Bradenton, we were shipped out to New Jersey, and we were moving fast. We went down one night to make out our last wills, and we were going to ship out the next day to Europe. So, I came out of this building, and there was about an eight foot drop with no rails



Bailey Lee stringing wire through a pine tree.

Photograph courtesy of Bailey Lee.

and no stairway where it was supposed to be, and I hit the ground and tore up my knee. I spent nine weeks in the Army hospital. That night, the old man came by and said, "We're shipping tomorrow." I said, "Get me a uniform, quick." And he said, "I can't do it Lee." I said, "What's the outfit mobilized for?" He said, "When the allies take Paris, we're going to set up telephone central offices."

Anyhow, things strung out, and they transferred me to Philadelphia to high-rigging school. I came back from that and was sent to Italy. I left just before, Christmas of 1944. We marched down to the train station. We went on to Italy, and they sent us to a place called Purple Heart Valley, on the Rapido River. I guess Rapido means rapid in Italian. There had been one hellacious bunch of fighting around there.

Q: What did you see?

A: Everything all torn to hell. We could hear at night cannon fire north of us, and sometimes small arms fire. That was the closest I got to battle. Like I said, I was no warrior...and they were trying to hijack us into the infantry. The lieutenant slipped out and caught a ride to Naples. He found the colonel we reported to, and the colonel said, "Hell No! They already got one of my outfits, they're not getting you guys!" He got some trucks and came after us. He said, "Turn those rifles back in, pack up your stuff, and we're gone." We were highly trained technicians by then. We started out building Rhombic Antennas, diamond shaped, and boy, they had to be right on the money. They sent directional signals, and the idea was the bombers and fighters in Africa would home in on that signal, and they'd know where they were. As the war moved north, they started coming into Capodichino Airport. We built a station at Capodichino. There were twelve men and one officer.

From there, we went to Venice – put up a station there. That was a good duty, too. Good swimming, no officers or M.P.'s to harass us. We had private rooms for eight hours each. The food was fantastic.

Q: All of these places you and your men were sent, you didn't see any fighting?

A: No. I saw the aftermath. Saw a lot of stuff torn up, disabled guns and tanks. As for the actual fighting, I was not there.

Q: What about the people that lived there?

A: They were in a hell of a mess. You couldn't help but feel sorry for them. They were in dire straits, but you never saw any paper or garbage anywhere. We had to go back to Milan. There was a problem there, and we did some more work on that station. By that time, the war in Europe was over – the war in Japan was fast coming down. In fact, when we were in Milan in 1945, they dropped the first atomic bomb.

Q: So you had been in the service for a long time?

A: Yes. Five years, two months, fourteen days, two and a half hours and some minutes.

I went to see the sergeant major. He said, "Lee, I think you've got enough points to go home." He shuffled through his papers, and said, "You've got more than enough to go home. You take your orders from me from now on." They shipped me home on an old liberty ship. Twenty seven days out there. I was trying to get home for my daughter's second birthday party. Got home the day after her party on November 21, 1945. So you see, I was doing vital work, but I didn't do any shooting. There were times I think I would have been better off

Q: Why did they put you all at Drew Field when there was MacDill Air Force Base?

A: MacDill was already to capacity, and they had to have another training field. And like I said, when we crowded that up (at Drew), one battalion of us went to Bradenton, and we had that ball field over there loaded down with people.

Q: When did they finally close Drew Field?

A: Sometime after the end of the war. They shut it down after peace was signed and everything. And it wasn't long before they were selling off hunks of it.

Q: What was your highest rank?

A: Staff sergeant.

Q: So, from the beginning when you joined the Army, I guess they saw the potential in you and wanted to keep you here in the states to train men.

A: Could have been. I had an I.Q. then of 117-127, and it was more than necessary to go to officers' training school, and they tried more than once to get me to go, but I said, "Hell No!"

Q: Why?

A: I just didn't want it. I've always been independent. I like it that way.

Q: So you trained men to go and fight?

A: I trained them in every thing you can think of, from shooting to survival, to climbing. I was hard as nails, but I was fair. Thank God I got home. Thank God I'm still here.

A CIVIL WAR INCIDENT ON TAMPA BAY: TWO CONTEMPORARY VIEWS

by Robert A. Taylor

INTRODUCTION

Historians constantly find themselves facing conflicting recollections of past events. As a result, they must carefully shift and weigh evidence in order to reconstruct the most accurate picture of past occurrences. The Civil War, with its abundance of eyewitness accounts preserved in letters, diaries, and newspapers, provides scholars with numerous examples of contradictory testimony. Even under the clear Florida skies, the so-called “fog of war” often descended to cloud memories of those Union and Confederate combatants fighting for control of the peninsula.

The following are two divergent accounts of one small skirmish fought on the shores of Tampa Bay in March 1863. A landing party from the Union blockader *U.S.S. Pursuit* was ambushed by a force of Confederate soldiers on Gadsden’s Point near where MacDill Air Base is today located. While it is evident that both versions recount the same incident, there are obvious contradictions. For example, the reports vary as to the numbers of men actually engaged and casualties suffered by both sides. The rebel version of what took place eventually appeared in the *Mobile Advertiser and Register*, while the captain of the *Pursuit* recorded the experience of his men in a statement published in the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*. The modern reader is left to divine what really happened on the beach at Gadsden's Point from the following descriptions of the action.

* * * * *

From the *Mobile Daily Advertiser and Register*, April 23, 1863:

The following, from a letter to the Florida paper (we have mislaid the credit) is an account of an affair already briefly noted:

On Wednesday (March 25th) a steamer and bark came in sight and anchored some eight miles below town in the bay. In the evening the steamer weighed anchor and returned down the bay, leaving the bark occupying her bold and defiant position right in our face. So our commander, Capt. J. W. Pearson, concluded to try what virtue there might be in a “Yankee trick” to entrap a Yankee crew; so consequently, on Thursday (26th), he detailed eighteen of his men and placed them under command of Lieut. Harrison (son of Dr. Harrison, a Methodist minister, formerly of Wankeenah), and directed them to proceed to Gadsden’s Point, opposite the bark, on Thursday night, and conceal themselves near the beach, and next morning send some three of their number, blackened and dressed as negroes, to the edge of the water to make signals as fugitive slaves. So, yesterday, we were all on tiptoe here to see the result. By and by, like the deluded trout by the varnegated bob, they struck at the supposed butterfly. A barge with twenty six men, well armed, was sent from the bark, to convey on board Abraham’s ship of war with due military honors, these sable sons and daughters of Ham.

When within some forty or fifty yards of the supposed Cuffey and wife Doreas and their sweet little ebony darter Phillis, just now in her teens, one exclaiming to the other: "Now we'll be free!" "Only listen," says a fellow in the barge, "how these poor devils already rejoice in anticipated liberty." But alas! There is in many a slip between the cup and the lip, and so did these poor deluded creatures of Abe find it; for at this juncture the barge grounded, and our boys emerged from their concealment and formed on the water's edge – Lieut. Harrison, at the same time, demanding a surrender of the boat's crew.

The commander of the barge, said to be a fine looking man, splendidly dressed, pulled out his white pocket handkerchief, began to wave it and demanding respect for it – but all the time kept urging his own men to "back! back!" evidently intending to make use of that as a ruse; to get out of the reach of our boy's guns. This parley continued for some five minutes, when the Lieutenant perceiving their design and penetrating their treachery, ordered his men to fire! The commander and several of his men fell at the first fire, and out of the twenty six that left the bark, but two left to work the oars when they had got out of reach. So that twenty four were either killed or disabled. Three fell overboard when shot – two were dragged in but the other was left. The commander fell overboard on his face with his hand outside: they saw his handkerchief fall into the water from his hand. Strange to say, although the enemy fired some twelve to fifteen guns at our boys, and the bark commenced shelling them immediately, yet on our side "nobody" was hurt.

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From U.S. Department of War, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate navies in the War of the Rebellion*, 26 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1901), Series 1, vol. 17, 393-99.

U.S. BARK PURSUIT
Off Gladsden's Point, Tampa Bay
March 27, 1863.

Sir: I am obliged to report an act of shameful treachery committed by the rebels under a flag of truce. The circumstances are as follows: Last night, at about 10 P.M., a small fire was discovered on the beach at Gadsden's Point, which bears N. 1/4 W., 2 miles distant. Supposing it to have been made by escaped contrabands who were desirous of coming to the ship, I was about to send a boat; but on further consideration I deemed it more prudent to wait until daylight. In the morning no signs of anyone could be seen on shore. About noon, however, a small smoke was discovered on the beach, and three persons were seen waving a flag of truce. It being evident that they wished to communicate with the ship, I sent the first cutter with an armed crew, under charge of Acting Master Henry K. Lapham, who pulled toward them with a white handkerchief flying as a flag of truce. On nearing the beach two of the persons were found to be clothed in female apparel; their faces were blackened, and one of them appeared to be overcome with joy, wringing her hands and repeatedly exclaiming, "Thank God! Thank God! I am free!" As soon, however, as the boat touched the beach it became evident that it was a white man in disguise, for he threw off a shawl and picked up a musket. At this signal about 100 men arose from ambush and demanded the surrender of the boat. Mr. Lapham replied, "Be honorable. Respect the flag of

truce.” They again said, “Will you surrender?” Mr. Lapham replied, “No never.” Whereupon they fired a volley of musketry, severely wounding Mr. Lapham and three of the boat’s crew. The fire was returned and two of the rebels were seen to fall (one in female costume). Mr. Lapham ordered the crew to jump overboard and keep the boat between them and the shore, which they did, some of the wounded assisting in dragging the boat, while the others continued to fire until the ammunition became wet. As soon as the rebels fired on the boat I sprung the ship, fired four shells among them and sent the third cutter with Acting Assistant Surgeon H. K. Wheeler to assist the sinking boat. The wounded are all on board receiving the most careful attendance and the surgeon’s report of casualties will be forwarded to you by the first opportunity.¹

I beg leave to state that I witnessed the whole affair, and deem it most miraculous that any of the boat’s crew should have escaped, as the rebels were no less than 100 in number, and not over 30 yards distant from the boat. She could easily have been captured were it not for the cool and determined manner in which she was defended. The only comment that I can make on the conduct of Mr. Lapham and the boat’s crew is that they have proved themselves to be truly brave men.

Regretting my inability to communicate more briefly a faithful detail of the events, I have honor to remain,

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,
Wm. P. Randall, Acting Volunteer Lieutenant, Commanding.

¹ The surgeon of the *Pursuit* reported that Acting Master Lapham received a wound in his left arm, while Seaman Edward K. Smith was struck by a ball that impacted on his lower jaw. Two other sailors suffered from wounds to the head and back.