Crime and Racial Violence in Tampa during World War II

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Benjamin Mays and his wife Sadie, two African-American social workers, came to Tampa in 1926 to work for the local chapter of the Urban League. Reflecting upon his arrival, Benjamin Mays later made this comment on race relations in Tampa: “Negro-White relations in Tampa were good, and would so continue as long as the ‘good Negroes’ and the ‘little white angels’ maintained their respective fictions and illusions.” Even though this comment relates to race relations in Tampa more than a decade before the beginning of World War II, the climate seemed not to have change very much. For instance, Mays explained that he and his wife were almost fired from the Urban League because his wife insisted on being called “Mrs. Mays” and not “Sadie.” The white executive secretary of the Tampa Welfare League and Community Chest even demanded that Mrs. Mays refrain from using titles when speaking or writing to other African Americans.

Even though this custom seems a bit strange today, it persisted into the 1940s. When dealing with African Americans, the local newspapers never used “Mr.” or “Mrs.” Instead they always referred to a black person by first name, most of the time followed by his or her last name. Thousands of examples can be found in the *Tampa Morning Tribune*. This custom is exemplified in an article of September 1942, which described a future program of the Tampa Urban League. In this article, the African-American administrators of the league were not referred as Mr. or Mrs. On the other hand, these titles were used for the white members of the league, some of whom actually held lower positions in the league than blacks.

Throughout the 1940s, African Americans in Tampa, and all around the United States, fought against discrimination and exclusion. The war period influenced their decision to act. Neil A. Wynn explains in his study of African Americans during World War II that “blacks immediately recognized that the war provided a crisis in which rights could be fought for and won.” Inspired by the “Four Freedoms” of Franklin Roosevelt, many African Americans demanded racial equality at home. Even though the task of black troops was to fight for freedom overseas, many realized that without an improvement in domestic race relations, the United States would not be able to play an important international role.

It is very difficult to find anything about the feelings of African Americans toward the war in Tampa’s local press. There seem to be no surviving copies of the *Florida Bulletin*, which was the weekly black newspaper published in the area. The white press rarely report on African-American activities or concerns. The only articles that can be found are reports of either criminal activities or African-American involvement in the army and in community services. However, on the national level, the *Crisis* (the magazine of the NAACP) and African-American newspapers, such as the *Chicago Defender*, did comment on the situation. Generally, their editorial columns were dedicated to complaints about discrimination in the military, reminders of the importance of the fight against fascism, and calls for fair employment practices. This latter topic was emphasized, and cartoons as well as articles stressed that many African Americans
were unemployed while the American war industry was in need of manpower. To portray this idea, slogans such as “Lift the Bar-Beat the Axis” were numerous.⁶

In Tampa, the shipyard was the principal war industry in the area. Even though it employed some African Americans, discrimination in salary was a source of irritation. M.C. Strachan reported the situation to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and asked for help. He explained that skilled black workers were often required to teach white unskilled workers their trade. However, when those whites completed their education, they were either promoted within the Tampa shipyard or sent to other shipyards and earned an average of a dollar an hour, while the African Americans who taught the trade remained in Tampa with an unskilled worker status and a salary of thirty cents an hour. Black workers had little hope of being promoted and were often “assigned to a broom and shovel” when white men were numerous enough to fill all the skilled workers’ positions.⁷ Strachan also explained that African Americans were the last hired and the first fired. This situation was reported to Lawrence Cramer, Executive Secretary of the Committee on Fair Employment Practices, but no real sanction against the shipyard seems to have been taken.⁸

These discriminatory practices were apparently not triggered by the war, but had existed before. In 1938 the white boilermakers and machinists of the Tampa Shipbuilding and Engineering Company were able to obtain the dismissal of 500 African-American workers. They also obtained the demotion of most of the 100 remaining black workers. Overall, the situation in
As a way to fight the war more effectively, the NAACP campaigned for an end to racial discrimination under the slogan “Lift the Bar-Beat the Axis.”

Photograph from *Crisis*, (July 1942).

the shipyards did not improve very much during the war. However, the percentage of blacks in the shipbuilding industry in Florida increased slightly in the 1940s. In 1940, only 11 percent of
the state’s shipyards’ workers were black; by 1950, this percentage had risen to 14 percent. However, the recruiting techniques in Tampa might have been a little peculiar. For instance, on August 10, 1943, eighteen African Americans were jailed because they refused to work on the docks. They were arrested and taken to the hospital for a health test, and those unable to provide a draft certificate or prove they were employed were asked to work in the shipyard. The prosecutor explained that he intended to “clean up this class” by either making them work for private concerns or putting them on stockade crews to work for the city.

Evidence of blatant racism can be found in the press and in the declarations of certain officials. The campaign against venereal disease, which became a significant problem during the war, illustrates the problem. Venereal disease, particularly syphilis, spread through prostitution, and the large number of single men stationed in Tampa contributed to the epidemic. In the minds of community leaders, venereal diseases became associated with African Americans. The *Tampa Daily Times* contended that 45 to 50 percent of the men who contracted venereal diseases in the army were African Americans. In the bars or “jook joints,” African-American women were arrested and systematically tested for venereal disease at the city stockade.

Typifying white Tampans’ assumptions about disease and race was the mayor, Robert E. Lee Chancy. On the eve of the 1943 Democratic primary, Chancy, who was accused of being too lax on this issue, boldly accused African Americans of being the source of the problem: “If we had no Negro soldiers here, our record for social protection for military personnel would be one of the finest in the United States.” However, he did not put the blame on the entire African-American community; he explained that the “better element of our Negroes” was active in changing the situation. This comment also demonstrates the paternalistic attitude toward African Americans. The reference to “our Negroes” shows that whites thought that there were good and bad African Americans. The good ones were presumably the people accepting segregation and exclusion, and the bad ones lived on the edge of society or revolted against the existing system. The 1926 idea expressed by Benjamin Mays of a society divided into “little angels” and “good Negroes” apparently was still very much alive almost twenty years later.

The Urban League, a nationwide social welfare association for blacks, was probably the best known African-American organization in the Tampa area. Some of its events were reported in the local newspapers. The editor of the *Tampa Morning Tribune* even wrote that the Urban League had played “an important part in advancing the community interests of Tampa Negroes and making them better citizens.” However, it was not the Urban League which led the fight against Jim Crow in Tampa. The National Association for the Advancement of the Colored People (NAACP) provided legal support for this kind of activity. Created in 1910 by black leaders, such as W.E.B. Du Bois, who were considered radicals, the NAACP sought the abolition of segregation, an end to the white primary, and the equalization of education for African-American and white children. By 1940, almost 90,000 people had joined the NAACP nationally. The Tampa chapter, which dated from 1915, was not as powerful as many in the nation, but it was very active during the war. For instance, the branch filed two suits against segregation by the local bus company. They also demanded integrated elevators in public buildings.
This increased militancy had gradually built up, but it became more open in Tampa during the war. Nevertheless, the white press did not report the legal fights of the NAACP. Without the records of the NAACP, it would be almost impossible to study the complete story of protest during the war years. The newspaper articles dealing with topics such as the equalization of teachers’ salaries only reported the opinion of white teachers or of the superintendent. The opinion of African-American teachers was not discussed by the press, which represented the NAACP as an organization led by Northerners who were corrupting local African Americans. However, the involvement of Tampa’s African-American community was critical, and the local leaders of the NAACP were dedicated to the fight for a measure of justice, as will be seen in this article on the black community's fight against police brutality and unfair judicial practices.\textsuperscript{16}

Even though no lynching occurred in Tampa during World War II, violence still mediated race relations. One of the most common forms was police brutality, which was rarely condemned except when it resulted in the death of a suspect in the hands of police. In terms of violence perpetrated by African Americans in the community, it is difficult to evaluate accurately the nature and frequency of such acts. The local press was often biased, and objective accounts of an event involving blacks were rare. However, the nature of these crimes attributed to blacks is interesting to study. The large MacDill Army Air Field located in Tampa often served as the

\textbf{In a display of patriotism, scouts participated in a flag-raising ceremony in front of Tampa’s Urban League Building in 1942.}

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.
stage for racial tensions. It is important to look at the role of the military police and their relations with African-American servicemen, which ultimately led to a riot in 1946.

Tampa bustled during World War II. The shipyards were manufacturing for the military, and many servicemen were stationed at MacDill, Drew, and Henderson air fields, which instantly created jobs for local inhabitants. Nevertheless, though this was a wartime period, the city seemed relatively calm. Except for the presence of Latin immigrants, the white community was probably less diverse than it is today. Tampa was still a predominantly southern community which had difficulty dealing with the African-American community. The last local lynching had occurred on December 2, 1935, when Joseph Shoemaker was fatally injured during a vigilante attack. Subsequent inquiries implicated some influential members of the community as well as Tampa police officers. The white victim was involved with a local political faction called the Modern Democrats which was associated with the Socialist party. Among other things, Shoemaker was interested in reducing the level of corruption and fraud in Tampa. On November 30, 1935, Shoemaker and two other members were “taken for a ride” outside of town. They were then flogged, tarred, and feathered. This mob killing was not racially motivated since the three victims were white men, but it was a political murder that showed lynching persisted in Florida.  

In 1941, a violent attack on an African American took place in Quincy, a little town in northern Florida, and the incident had reverberations in Tampa. Apparently, the victim was suspected of an assault on a white child. Afraid of the gathering mob, he had tried to find refuge at the local jail, but it seems that the sheriff surrendered him to the mob. The suspect was violently killed with no other form of trial. This dramatic lynching was not very much publicized by Tampa’s local press. However, when Westbrook Pegler wrote a national column about it, calling Florida “an adolescent and thus far irresponsible state” and describing Floridians as “creatures having the physical appearances of human beings,” many Tampans reacted angrily. The editor of the *Tampa Morning Tribune* answered almost immediately to the accusation and explained that “999 of every 1,000 Floridians deplore and denounce lynching.” His main complaint about Pegler’s article was that the author generalized and falsely accused all Floridians.

Readers of the newspaper also reacted to the article. Even though many expressed their anger at Pegler’s misunderstanding of Florida and Floridians, some reacted to the lynching itself. One woman, for instance, explained that she wanted the sheriff of Quincy to be suspended because he allowed his prisoner to be lynched. Other readers who had recently moved to Florida explained that they did not agree with the editor and that serious problems existed. “A. C.” wrote that the statement of the editor on the number of Floridians who deplored the lynching was not true. The reader added that in the past, worse events had occurred in the Tampa area. Finally, others (supposedly belonging to the small percentage of Floridians not condemning the lynching) expressed support for lynch law. One woman wrote: “I hope that if they ever stage another nice, jolly lynching up there ... they will give me the pleasure of being in on it.”

Without the column of Westbrook Pegler, this crime would have been almost unreported in the local press. The readers of the *Tampa Tribune* seem to have been more concerned about what people thought about Florida than about the lynching. MacDill Air Base and the shipyard industry brought national attention to Tampa, and Tampans were concern about their image.
Most condemned the lynching publicly, and many probably realized that this kind of violent outburst against African Americans was very detrimental to the reputation of the town, which was economically expanding.

The local police had frequent violent encounters with black Tampans. Of course, there are very few articles in the press about this problem, except when the end result of a violent apprehension of a suspect had unexpected repercussions. This happened after Melissa Williams was arrested in June 1943. This African-American woman was to testify in a case involving Joseph E. McGlamery, city sanitary department superintendent. McGlamery was charged with forcing black prisoners of the city stockade to work on his private estate at Echo Lake. Five of those former prisoners, including Melissa Williams, were willing to testify in court against the superintendent. 21 Several days later she was arrested by the vice squad for “being drunk and creating a disturbance.” 22 When she appeared in court the next day, her face was badly bruised, and she was taken to the hospital. The physicians who examined her found her “insane.”

Many Floridians sought to overcome the image of the state captured in this 1931 cartoon from a Philadelphia newspaper.
According to the examining physicians who reported to the judge in charge of the McGlamery case, her state could not be entirely attributed to the police violence, but the beating triggered her insanity. 

Mayor Robert E. Lee Chancey, who had appointed McGlamery to his post in 1941, ordered an investigation. The report concluded that Mrs. Williams had resisted the arrest and one police officer had to slap her face with an open hand to calm her down. The driver of the police van that brought Mrs. Williams to the police station said that she was fine when she entered the wagon, but that he noticed that “her face was cut and bleeding on one side” only when she stepped out of the wagon. When this report was made public, Mayor Chancey commented that “there was nothing unusual” about Mrs. Williams’s arrest. He continued by stating that “the police officers handling the matter used little violence” during the arrest. Chancey specified that the policemen who arrested Mrs. Williams did not know that she was a witness in the case involving Superintendent McGlamery.

It is impossible to know what really happened at police headquarters on June 9, 1943. Journalists did not question the official report, and no further investigation was ordered. A few weeks later McGlamery was found not guilty. It seems, however, improbable that a single woman was such a threat to three police officers. Even though she might have been violent at the time of her arrest, the seriousness of her bruises is difficult to explain. Very few cases of this kind were reported in the press. Mrs. Williams’s beating would probably not have been reported if she had not been a witness in a case involving a city official. However, other cases lead to the conclusion that many similar incidents occurred in Tampa.

Simon Peter Taylor was an African American living in Tampa. On September 2, 1944, a Deputy Suarez went to Taylor’s apartment to deliver a “writ of replivin” because he had skipped a payment on furniture he was buying. Mrs. Kathryn Taylor was alone when she answered the door. Deputy Suarez left the apartment and met Taylor in the street. According to eyewitnesses, Taylor said that he did not want anyone to take the furniture and walked away from the police car toward his house. Deputy Suarez followed him, crossed the street, and started to beat him with a stick. Taylor answered to the blows by seriously injuring the policeman with a knife. During the struggle Officer Suarez took his gun and shot at Taylor’s feet, but Taylor seized the gun and fatally shot the policeman. He then fled to Alabama to escape the police, but he was arrested and returned for trial.

Even though this attack ended up in the killing of a police officer, it demonstrates quite clearly that the police officer was very aggressive toward the suspect. At the time of the attack the policeman was not legally on duty, but he did not seem to have a problem with attacking Taylor anyway. It is doubtful that Suarez would have acted the same way if Taylor had been white. After all, at the time Simon Taylor was only accused of delinquent payments on a bill!

Taylor was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to the electric chair by the judge. The first-degree murder charge implied that Taylor had acted with premeditation, which seems dubious according to the testimony of the witnesses. Fortunately for Taylor, the local NAACP decided to help him, and attorneys from the national office took the case to the Florida Supreme Court. On June 29, 1945, the Supreme Court reversed the original judgment and charged Taylor with second-degree murder, sentencing him to life imprisonment. Only one justice dissented from the opinion of his colleagues and declared that there was enough evidence to convict Taylor of first degree murder. However, the court’s majority explained that the racial difference of the
two men was important: “In this case, the deceased was a white man and the appellant a colored man.” They concluded, “When the two meet in combat, it is usually violent.” This dramatic incident demonstrates that policemen could be extremely aggressive toward African Americans. It also clearly demonstrates the bias of a local court which sentenced Taylor to death on the ground that he killed a white man, not so much that he defended himself against an attack. Had Taylor been white, this dramatic incident might have never happened, and if it had, the court would probably not have sentenced him to the electric chair.

The Flowers case is perhaps the best example of police brutality, as well as discrimination in the local judicial system. On the night of November 10, 1941, Catherine Oaks was raped by an African American who broke into her apartment. The aggressor asked to meet her on the next day on a bridge in Tampa. Mrs. Oaks went to the place, accompanied by the police. She recognized her assailant, but the police lost his trace and failed to arrest him. In a restaurant close to MacDill Air Base, she seemed to have later recognized her assailant, five months after the crime. On the basis of this identification, Edgar Flowers was arrested on April 23, 1942.

Flowers was arrested and questioned without being informed of the charges pending against him. This questioning was very peculiar. Flowers, nineteen years old, was taken for “a ride” in a police car for an hour and a half, and he was asked if he recognized the premises of Mrs. Oaks. He was then fingerprinted, and an officer explained to him that his fingerprints had been found in the house of Mrs. Oaks. This was a false statement. An officer then took Flowers to the apartment of Mrs. Oaks and asked him to show how he had entered the house: The officer basically asked him to confess to a crime he was still not aware he was charged with. Flowers explained in his deposition how the officer got his confession: “He first asked me what time I was there.... I said I was there about nine o’clock.” Flowers later reported that the police officer responded: “You are a God damn liar.” He then explained to the defendant that he was there at twelve o’clock. Flowers, afraid of the police and fearing to be lynched, said that was true.

Other considerations may also have pushed Edgar Flowers to confess. He was married, and his wife was pregnant and sick. The police took Mrs. Flowers to the police station for questioning, and the suspect saw his wife entering the station with two policemen. This pressure surely influenced Flowers in his declarations. In the evening Flowers was transferred to Clearwater, and the police explained that he could not stay in Tampa for his own security. Flowers was already afraid for his life, and this statement did not reassure him at all. The next day he was brought back to Tampa to confess his crime. In the presence of Chief of Police W.D. Bush, Assistant State Attorney J.F. Umstot took Flowers’ deposition. The questioning started with someone declaring, “Stand up, you black son of a bitch.” Flowers was asked how old he was. When he replied, one of the officers commented, “You have just lived long enough.” Chief Bush answered most of the questions asked by State Attorney Umstot and filled in the details. Flowers had only to answer “yes” occasionally.

The state based its accusation solely on this alleged confession. The only other evidence that Flowers attacked Mrs. Oaks was a man’s shoe found on the balcony of a neighbor. However, the shoe could not possibly have belonged to Edgar Flowers since he had bought a pair of similar shoes only after the November crime. The shoe store manager testified that he did sell similar shoes to the defendant, but that to the best of his knowledge it was after Christmas.
though Flowers had a perfectly good alibi for the time the crime was committed, he was convicted without recommendation of mercy. In 1942, in the state of Florida, this meant that Edgar Flowers was sentenced to death.\textsuperscript{32}

There being no black attorneys in Tampa at the time, the local NAACP branch hired a white attorney from the Tampa firm Bryan & Bryan to appeal the verdict. Thurgood Marshall and other legal advisors in the main office of the NAACP helped the local lawyers appeal to the Florida Supreme Court and ultimately to the U.S. Supreme Court. This case particularly interested leaders of the national NAACP because they wanted to bring a case of “forced confession” to the U.S. Supreme Court to establish a precedent. Unfortunately, the Florida Supreme Court denied the rehearing of the case. The U.S. Supreme Court subsequently denied the petition for certiorari on October 18, 1943. The only alternative left was to apply to the governor of the state for a commutation of Flowers’ sentence to life imprisonment, which was done by Bryan & Bryan.\textsuperscript{33} However, the results of this final procedure in the case were neither reported in the press nor followed by the NAACP. The outcome is therefore unknown.

These cases provide good examples of relations between the police and the African-American community. Beatings undoubtedly occurred which were not always reported or brought to court. It seems logical that in the light of the treatment they received, African Americans in Tampa were reluctant to call the police when they needed help. It also explains the fear many African Americans experienced when arrested by the police. In the case of Simon Taylor, the reaction of the police officer who first apprehended him led to a fatal shooting which was probably occasioned by the fear that the officer would not hesitate to shoot him. According to much evidence, and in retrospect, it seems unlikely that Edgar Flowers committed the attack on a white woman. However, the Tampa police obviously needed to arrest someone for this offense. Flowers was an easy target. Even though police brutality existed, and African Americans were accused of crimes they did not commit, it would be too easy to depict a manichean picture of racial violence where police officers were always at fault and African Americans were innocent victims of a racially discriminatory system.

The local press reported many crimes perpetrated by African Americans. In fact, most of the newspaper articles about African Americans were reports of crimes. It is difficult to judge if the accusations were true. In the case of Edgar Flowers, for instance, the press only interviewed Chief Bush and explained that Flowers had confessed to his crimes. According to the article, he was responsible for a series of rapes of white women.\textsuperscript{34} Even though Flowers might not have been the man responsible for the rape he was accused of, another African American must have been responsible. Certainly, the rape of a white woman by a black man has always been an explosive subject, and such crimes were highly publicized.

Among the other cases reported in the local press during World War II was that of Douglas Fowler, a janitor at a theater who was convicted of attempted rape of a white woman in 1943. According to the victim, Fowler took her to a room on the second floor of the movie theater and threatened her. He left her alone because he was called by other employees of the theater. She managed to leave the premises. Fowler was sentenced to twenty years in the state penitentiary, two weeks after the alleged attack took place.\textsuperscript{35}
Crimes by African Americans appeared frequently in the local press through the first half of the 1940s. For instance, in February 1942, two African Americans were charged with the murder of a Tampa hotel clerk. According to the newspaper article, the aggressors apparently wanted to rob the hotel. They took the cash, amounting to thirty-two dollars, and then shot the night clerk in the basement of the hotel. According to the article, the manager of the hotel heard the shots and stopped the assailant, a Mr. Parker, on his way out by threatening him with a toy gun. Chief Bush was in charge of taking the confession of Parker. It is difficult to know what really happened, considering that Parker had been employed at this hotel and had been fired recently. The motive for the crime seems to have been money. Most of the crimes reported in the newspaper during this period were in relation to money.

In mid-June 1942, a white lieutenant in the military and his woman companion were robbed by two African Americans in Tampa. The woman was shot during the attack. The total amount stolen from the two victims was $25.95. The two assailants burned the car and abandoned the victims on the side of the road. This crime seems to be highly symbolic. The motive of money seems to be again the most obvious one, but attacking a soldier in time of war was more expressive than attacking a wealthy man. Moreover, this military man was accompanied by a white woman. The aggressors were obviously not only looking for easy money. The Tampa police quickly organized a roundup of more than sixty suspects. On June 24, less than a week after the attack, two men (James Allen and Albert Fleck) were arrested for the felony. Less than forty-eight hours after their arrest, the two suspects were convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment.

Other crimes by blacks were reported in the newspapers. Most of the criminal actions reported were robberies and small larcenies. For instance, in 1943 an African-American maid was accused of stealing thirty cents from the purse of her employer. She was also accused of burning the purse, full of bills, after the theft. Even though the accused later explained that the police had forced her to sign her confession, she was convicted of grand larceny.

It would be wrong to conclude that African Americans were more involved in crime than white Tampans. However, the newspapers’ focus on African Americans and crime in the city sometimes gives the impression that the black community in Tampa was only composed of criminals! This conclusion, of course, is erroneous.

The MacDill Army Air Field was built in 1939. This military installation brought economic expansion to a Tampa weakened by the decline of its cigar industry. At the peak of the war, 15,000 servicemen were stationed at MacDill. They came from all parts of the country. Even though the air corps was not yet integrated, black troops were also stationed at MacDill. Relations between African-American soldiers and the military police became a source of conflict, and even violence throughout the United States. The frustrations and anger that accumulated over the years exploded in a series of ugly incidents and a riot at MacDill in 1946, right after the end of the war.

African Americans played a significant role in the military during World War II, and their treatment sparked a number of disputes. Even though articles on the efficiency of black troops appeared in newspapers, many African-American leaders deplored the way training camps were
segregated and the lack of opportunities for black men in the military. On the other hand, General Dwight Eisenhower publicly praised the courage of black battalions stationed in Africa. He cited the “steadfastness and bravery” of those troops. The Tampa Tribune published at least two major articles describing the importance of black troops. A journalist explained that after a visit at MacDill, he concluded African-American soldiers were not anymore “workers,” but that they were “fighters.” Black soldiers were mostly assigned to engineering units which were in charge of supplies in the camps and overseas. Even though elite battalions existed, the majority were not assigned to responsible positions, at least at the beginning of the war. However, the Tribune reporter seems to have been very enthusiastic about the tasks given to those troops. He described their assignments as “missions ranging from the dangerous job of penetrating alien territory to laying down advance airdomes for the air corps.”

Despite this supposed climate of liberty, equality and fraternity that characterized the military according to the local press, several conflicts between the military police and black servicemen took place in Tampa. In a case reported to the NAACP, Julia Padron, cousin of Frank V. Stovall who was stationed at MacDill, reported that in June 1943 an African-American soldier had been killed by the military police. This incident happened during the dispersal of a crowd. According to the testimony of Stovall, African-American soldiers had become scared and decided to arm themselves. Two military police learned about it and searched through the barracks to find the arms. Stovall, along with eight other soldiers, was accused of attempting to incite a riot.
Stovall’s sister-in-law, an NAACP member, alerted friends about this situation. She was scared her brother-in-law would be hurt because he was from the North: “The stories that come here at the office from camps in the south are enough to frighten me.” After being court martialed on October 15, 1943, and sentenced to a term of ten years, Stovall had his sentence commuted to five years. He was finally sent to a rehabilitation camp at Fort Knox, Kentucky. Milton Knovitz, assistant special council for the NAACP, explained that usually a person was not kept more than six months in such a camp and was later restored to active service. The local press in Tampa did not report the arrest of the soldiers nor the killing which, according to Stovall, triggered his conviction.

On August 3, 1943, twelve African Americas were charged with inciting a riot and interfering with police when they protested the arrest of a black soldier who was accused of stabbing a dog. According to the Tampa Daily Times, a crowd of African-American civilians formed around the military police station, located on Central Avenue in the heart of Tampa’s black district, where the suspect was being questioned. Fifty military police and twenty city policemen were called to disperse the crowd, and fights broke out. The journalist reported, “Several Negroes suffered bruised heads in the scuffles,” and he also noted “slight injuries” on the side of the police. Even though the military police were called and soldiers were on the scene, the city prosecutor explained that the disturbance was caused by “Negro hoodlums who hang around pool rooms.
and jook joints on Central Avenue and have many times defied Negro Military Police stationed in that district.” He further remarked that he would suggest to military authorities that “the area be included in the ‘off limits’ zone.” However, since the USO recreational facility for black military personnel was located in this area, it would have been difficult to forbid soldiers on Central Avenue.

What might have triggered violence and rebellion by black troops was the discrimination they constantly faced. The mistreatment particularly irritated blacks raised in the North. Segregation was strictly reinforced at the base. In 1945, German prisoners of war, who worked in the kitchen of the base hospital, protested because they had to serve black patients. The local authorities decided to relieve the prisoners of their duties and granted their wish of not serving African-American soldiers. A reporter for the Atlanta Daily World, a black newspaper, reported the story and explained that it was an insult to American soldiers who fought in the war and who were not respected.

All these incidents contributed to the heightening of a tense climate at the end of the war. This, along with other elements, led to the riots which took place in October 1946. The black soldiers awaiting their discharges complained about the menial tasks they were asked to performed at MacDill Air Base, while their white counterparts were exempt. They also complained about the
segregation of the base where facilities provided for African Americans were inferior to the ones provided for whites. The troubles started on October 27, 1946, when a group of black soldiers decided to “crash” a dance at the Negro NCO club. A melee erupted, and the military police were called. One black soldier was injured by an M.P.’s bullet, while a military policeman was injured in the temple. The crowd dispersed and then formed again. The angry soldiers marched toward the MacDill Avenue Gate, where they “overcame and disarmed an MP, smashed windows, tossed furniture into the street, dismantled the telephone and barricaded the gate entrance,” according to the official report of the Army. The *Tampa Morning Tribune* reported that “Negroes placed benches across the road and started hurling stones and sticks against the residents in nearby Gadsden Homes.”

According to an Air Force historian, the choice of this residential complex was not accidental. The Gadsden Homes was a government project strictly reserved for whites. Even though the demonstrators shouted “No more Jim Crow laws,” the military officially concluded that the riot was due to Communist agitation. It is interesting to note that as soon as the trouble started, nine city police cars, full of men heavily armed, came to protect the white inhabitants of Gadsden Homes. According to one historian, the MacDill riots were the largest the Air Force ever experienced, except for riots at Travis Air Force Base in 1971. However, the Tampa outburst did not change the situation of black troops. “Limited racial integration” was recommended after the events, but the Air Force did not change its racial policies until almost sixteen years later.

No lynchings occurred in Tampa during World War II, but the methods used by the police and the obvious prejudice of the local justice system still repressed blacks. Under the status quo, it seems that the legal actions organized by the NAACP’s local and national branches raised the morale of the African-American community. Even though the white elite still used force to suppress the black community, it was not done as openly as in previous years. After reading the files on the cases raised by the NAACP, it is difficult, however, to look at the reported crimes committed by African Americans and believe in the culpability of the suspects because of a confession, or even so-called irrefutable proof. So too it is difficult to believe the sole reason for the October 1946 riots at MacDill Air Base was the alleged presence of Communists at the base. Nevertheless, the economic boom in Tampa due to the shipyards and the accompanying national publicity probably helped local leaders realize that open racial violence was to be avoided.

Richard M. Dalfiume has referred to World War II as “The ‘Forgotten Years’ of the Negro Revolution.” This emphasis on the war years challenges the attitude of many scholars of African-American history, who have concentrated their research on the civil rights movement of the late 1950s and 1960s. As a result, there are few accounts of African Americans during the 1940s. However, those years were critical because they marked the beginning of claims of the black community in the United States. As Dalfiume emphasizes, the 1940s were the period when “the ground was prepared for the civil rights revolution of the 1950s and 1960s.”

According to NAACP records, the commitment of the African-American community in Tampa to fight unfair practices increased during the war years. The NAACP was very active in all parts of the country, and without the strong support of this organization, the black community of Tampa would have been less active. It seems that the local members of the NAACP felt confident in their reliance on the organization for legal as well as moral support. Thurgood
Marshall was one of the most important leaders of this early movement, and he managed to remain available for counseling on Tampa’s local issues as well as on national issues.

Despite tense race relations in Tampa and fear of violent police actions, African Americans in the area did challenge discriminatory treatment. In cases of extreme injustice, the community came together and tried to help by providing legal counsel to people facing police brutality or blatantly unfair sentences. This demonstrates that African Americans were not passive victims, but rather felt strong enough to challenge white authorities. These fights against a discriminatory and unjust system did not take place during world War II by pure chance. The ideology behind the war in Europe and the fight against fascism and for democracy overseas formed a crucial element in this sudden consciousness of injustice and violent repression. “Our war is not against Hitler in Europe, but against Hitlers in America” wrote a columnist of the Pittsburgh Courier. This statement summarizes very well the state of mind of African Americans of the time who were prepared to fight for justice at home.


2 Ibid., 114-115.

3 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, September, 28, 1942, 2


6 *The Crisis*, July 1942, 225.


8 Thurgood Marshall to Norman Lacey, September 29, 1941, ibid., Doc. 165, Reel 7.


10 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, August 10, 1942, 8.

11 Ibid., August 15, 1943, 2; September 4, 1943, 2; *Tampa Daily Times*, August 13, 1943, 1.

12 *Tampa Daily Times*, September 1, 1943, 1.

13 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, September 26, 1942, 4.


15 Norman Lacey to Walter White November 10, 1941, Papers of the NAACP Part 4, Doc. 174, Reel 7. See also Walter T. Howard and Virginia M. Howard, “The Early Years of the NAACP in Tampa,” *Tampa Bay History*, 16 (Fall/Winter 1994): 41-56.

16 J. L. LeFlore to Walter White, November 29, 1941, Ibid., Doc. 179, Reel 7.

18 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, May 19, 1941, 4.

19 Ibid., May 20, 1941, 8.

20 Ibid., May 23, 1941, 6.

21 *Tampa Daily Times*, June 4, 1943, 1, 7.

22 Ibid., June 6, 1943, 3.

23 Ibid., June 12, 1943, 1.

24 Ibid., June 6, 1943, 1, 3.


26 Newspaper clipping, October 28, 1944, in ibid., Doc. 218, Reel 14.

27 Newspaper clippings, ibid., Doc. 221, 252, 253, Reel 14.

28 Petition for Writ of Certiorari to the Florida Supreme Court, ibid., Doc. 485 to 490, Reel 23.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.


34 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, April 24, 1942 13.

35 Ibid., January 15, 1943, 9, and January 19 1943, 16.

36 Ibid., February 21, 1942, 5.

37 Ibid., June 22, 1942, 1, June 25, 1942, 2, June 27, 1942, 2,


41 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, December 25, 1942, 16.

42 Ibid, October 8, 1942, Part 2, 8.
43 Ibid., November 27, 1942, 24.


45 Alice Baird to Frank ?, September 8, 1943, ibid., Doc. 345, Reel 4.


50 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, October 29, 1946, 2.


53 *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 21, 1940.