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*T*HE QUEEN OF THE GULF
GOES TO WAR: THE BELLEVIEW BILTMORE
AND WORLD WAR II

BY DEIRDRE SCHUSTER

*R*ecruit William Tordoff walked out of the room he shared with seven other trainees, turned right, and strolled down the elegant staircase to the even grander foyer of the Belleview Biltmore, often called the Queen of the Gulf. At twenty years old, Bill was one of thousands drafted into the Army Air Corps and trained at the Belleview Biltmore during World War II. A self-described farm boy from Iowa, he could not help but be slightly in awe of the grand lady who housed him while he trained for almost two months before being sent off to “fight the Japs.” On this particular day in January 1943, it was cool enough to wear an overcoat, but he knew it would warm up considerably in the area known as the Sparkling City. The training grounds, once a world-renowned golf course, were muddy in places, with tree trunks, fences, and other objects to be used in training young men for war. For two days in a row, other trainees had been pulled out to act as drill instructor. Today was Bill’s turn. The officer in charge asked, “Why haven’t you been DI yet, recruit?” Bill’s reply was one any visitor to the Sunshine State might make on a day that was going to turn out to be a “hot one”: “Bad enough to be drilling in the hot sun. I don’t want to be yelling things, too!”

Arriving in January 1943, Bill would have his “butt worked off” by the marching, drilling, and “playing soldier” that taught these fresh recruits how to be soldiers. Every one of them was proud to serve. Bill had fought a 4-F designation, meaning that he was physically unfit for duty; an earlier car accident made his neck “crackle” with movement, but he swore it didn’t hurt. The Army doctors let him in, and he left his wife, Erma, and three-month-old baby on Christmas night 1942. Overall, his stay at the Belleview was enjoyable, even though some of his training caused sore spots. On one occasion, the trainees had to jump into a ravine to elude

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Tampa Bay History Center Collection

The Belleview Biltmore is shown in all its glory in this 1939 postcard. Soldiers would soon replace vacationers at the grand hotel.

“the enemy.” What they did not know was that Florida’s ravines are filled with prickly things called sandspurs. Bill spent the weekend picking out the sandspurs and was more careful where he jumped in the future. It was all part of a soldier’s training to “look before you leap.”¹

The Belleview Biltmore, built in 1897 by railroad magnate Henry Plant as a 145-room winter-season hotel, was a grand resort with 425 rooms by the time the Army Air Corps leased the building and grounds from owner Arnold Kirkeby. A self-sufficient resort with its own post office that also served the nearby town of Belleair, it proved the perfect spot to barrack the overflow of military staff from MacDill and Drew Fields in Tampa, Florida. On the Gulf coast and near the sparkling city of Clearwater, the Belleview, along with the Fort Harrison Hotel and the Gray Moss Inn, housed more than three thousand soldiers for over a year. With the soldiers training on the grounds of the resort, as well as drilling in front of city hall, local civilians were inexorably drawn into the life of the military. Dimouts, rationing, and rat patrols became the order of the day along with weekly parties and special entertainment events. Crime dropped, and juvenile delinquents had little to do with the arrival of so many men in uniform. Pinellas County itself was transformed with men from the Army Air Corps, Marines (in Dunedin), and Coast Guard (in Tarpon Springs).

The Belleview was sold to Kirkeby in 1939 after a number of resorts had gone bankrupt and closed. The Belleview was luckier, with its own stockholders

¹ William Tordoff, interview by Deirdre Schuster, 21 November 2008.

keeping it open until the sale. When Kirkeby leased the Queen to the Army, a quick inventory had to be done. Clint Mitchell was a teenager when he helped to move out furnishings from the hotel. “The only things left were a bed, a dresser, and a nightstand. Everything else went. Lamps, chandeliers, pictures, everything.” The beautiful wallpaper and carved wood moldings would prove to be a beautiful backdrop for many men who previously would never have even dreamed of staying in the Belleview Biltmore.² August 1942 was the turning point for the Belleview as thousands of trainees came over from MacDill Air Force Base. Pam Dubov’s father, stationed at MacDill, was envious of those trainees who were able to stay at the Belleview.³ Furnishings, pictures, rugs, and other items were sold, placed in other Kirkeby hotels, or put into storage in the Weaver Grocery warehouse in Clearwater.⁴ The government and Kirkeby made no provision for maintenance of the hotel. Fire was always a worry in the large wooden structure (the world’s largest occupied wood frame structure), and the soldiers maintained a fire watch. Eventually, the Army would install a \$200,000 sprinkler system. It was finished the day the Army moved out and is still in use today. According to current manager Tom Bouchard, the system is up to code and ready to be used, if needed.⁵

As the soldiers prepared to be moved into the Belleview on August 2, 1942, the Army was negotiating the use of two other hotels in the area: the Fort Harrison Hotel and the Gray Moss Inn. The original four hundred soldiers, transferred from the St. Petersburg Replacement Training Center, were part of a permanent unit to be stationed at the Belleview (to become the Group C Replacement Training Center). The 918 and 588 Special School Squadrons were to be “instructed in the rudiments of army life.” This included the usual basic training in military law and customs, as well as first aid and sex hygiene. After this three-week course of training, the recruits were to be sent to various places depending upon their abilities. The first wave of soldiers was also in charge of getting the Belleview ready for use.⁶ The list of hometowns of the soldiers that passed through the Belleview was as varied as its resort guest list. In addition to St. Louis, Kansas City, Sioux Falls, Omaha, Keesler Field, Hollywood, and L.A., there were trainees from China, England, and a “full-blooded Piute Indian, from Flagstaff.” Private John Truehorse was described as “one boy that can really say he’s a full blooded American.”⁷

With the arrival of more soldiers and officers, commanding officer Colonel Floyd E. Lindley expressed some displeasure with the fact that his officers could not find affordable housing in the Clearwater area; therefore, they would stay at

² Clinton Mitchell, interview by Deirdre Schuster, 26 November 2008.

³ Pam Dubov, interview by Deirdre Schuster, 10 December 2008.

⁴ “Belleview Is About Ready for Army,” *Clearwater Sun*, 5 August 1942.

⁵ Tom Bouchard and Sharon Delahanty interview, 11 November 2008.

⁶ “1,000 More Are Due Next Week,” *Clearwater Sun*, 6 August 1942.

⁷ Floyd P. Jones, “Strictly G.I.,” *Clearwater Sun*, 7 March 1943. Chick Rosnick, “Six—Oh!—Nine,” *Clearwater Sun*, 21 March 1943.

the Belleview, as it was “sufficient for all officers” until the rents came down in the area.⁸ Throughout August the central job at the Belleview was “policing the grounds, trimming hedges, mowing the lawns, weeding,” and other jobs that would return the resort to its appearance as it had been “at the height of the tourist season in winters past.”⁹ Once that was accomplished, the Belleview was opened for a public viewing. Citizens who could only dream of being admitted to the posh resort were suddenly welcome to view the grand Queen. However, visitors to the open house were only allowed to view the main floor, as the upstairs floors and cottages housed the soldiers. The Army Air Corps’ fifty-eight-piece band played music, the military police controlled traffic patterns, and a “time-honored retreat ceremony” and parade entertained the general populace on the Belleview’s “two swanky golf courses.”¹⁰ During their off time, soldiers made their way to the downtown area, crowding Cleveland Avenue’s restaurants and shops.¹¹ As soldiers from Squadron 588 were transferred to the Fort Harrison and Gray Moss and the 413 was added to the Belleview area businesses began to boom and changes were needed in regulations and hours.

Among the concerns that arose in the Sparkling City over the use of the three hotels was the lost revenue from the tourist industry.¹² In one article printed by the *Clearwater Sun*, state hotel commissioner Hunter G. Johnson and Chamber of Commerce secretary Fred J. Lee assured tourists that more than one hundred hotels were still available for those wishing to “find sleeping accommodations in Florida, to fit any purse.” The *Clearwater Sun* ran a full-page ad throughout the season with a question-and-answer page that included information regarding recreational facilities, beach use, blackouts, and transportation.¹³

Along with tourist issues, the city had to contend with liquor laws and business hours. Colonel Lindley requested that the hours for liquor stores be altered so that no beer or liquor could be sold after midnight on any night or at all on Sunday. A limit on package goods was also requested. The sheriff, Todd Tucker, attended the meeting to ensure that he could get other cities to cooperate with the request.¹⁴ In the end, Lindley gained some measure of control. Dealers were not allowed to sell liquor, beer, or wine after midnight, seven days a week. Servicemen were banned from buying alcohol before five in the evening, except on Saturday and Sundays, and hard liquor was banned for everyone from midnight Saturday to eight o’clock Monday morning. The package sale ban was also adopted in an attempt to keep the

⁸ “More Soldiers Arrive at Belleview,” *Clearwater Sun*, 10 August 1942.

⁹ “More Soldiers Arrive at Belleview,” *Clearwater Sun*, 12 August 1942.

¹⁰ “Open House at Belleview Sunday,” *Clearwater Sun*, 19 August 1942. “Householder to See Belleview Ceremonies,” *Clearwater Sun*, 23 August 1942.

¹¹ “Air Corps Men at Two Hotels in City,” *Clearwater Sun*, 16 August 1942.

¹² “Army Men Due at Gray Moss Inn Aug. 11,” *Clearwater Sun*, 2 August 1942.

¹³ “Hotelmen Move to Scotch Rumor,” *Clearwater Sun*, 20 August 1942 and “As Usual Clearwater Welcomes Its Winter Visitors with the Usual Vacation Facilities,” *Clearwater Sun*, November 1942.

¹⁴ “City to Hear Army Liquor Request,” *Clearwater Sun*, 17 August 1942.



Tampa Bay History Center Collection

South view of the Belleview Biltmore. The hotel grounds were used for a variety of training exercises, as well as offering a peaceful oasis during the soldiers' off hours.

soldiers from stocking up for parties in their rooms.¹⁵

Time not spent drinking was taken up with shopping in Clearwater's stores. Usual hours ended at six o'clock in the evening. This proved to be a problem for soldiers who did not get off duty until five. In order to give the servicemen time to shop for "certain commodities," one store stayed open until seven. This sparked a discussion with the Chamber of Commerce and led to other stores following suit.¹⁶

The relationship between soldiers and civilians was reciprocal. As shops and restaurants altered life for soldiers, the soldiers gave back with entertainment. Some would say that boxing, wrestling, and team sports like baseball and basketball were part of the training of a good soldier, keeping him fit and able to fight the enemy. Beginning in October 1942, the Army began taking on the Marines from Dunedin in the boxing ring at the Municipal Auditorium. What exactly was there to do for recreation for the Army Air Corps in the area? As Private R. W. McClure answered in the local paper, "the Athletic and Recreation unit of Squadron 413 at the Belleview Biltmore Hotel has the answer." Free game periods, calisthenics, and sports were all available to "make conditioning a pleasure and a booster of morale." He even quoted another private from Oklahoma, Jack Powell: "If the fellows at home could see this, they'd all be in the air force."¹⁷ And why not, when a person would get to stay in

¹⁵ "Placards List Liquor Rules," *Clearwater Sun*, 20 August 1942.

¹⁶ "Army Affects Hours of Stores," *Clearwater Sun*, 11 October 1942.

¹⁷ "Recreation for Air Forces Is Varied," *Clearwater Sun*, 25 September 1942.

a luxurious resort, be entertained, and have activities scheduled by the Clearwater Civilian Defense Council? Writing and reading rooms, games, pool and ping pong tables, juke boxes, radios, and dancing were available every day, in addition to art instruction, dancing instruction, and basketball and volleyball.¹⁸

As the holidays approached, local families were asked to provide a bit of home for the recruits. “Want a Soldier for Thanksgiving?” “Pumpkin Pies for Soldiers Wanted”—these were some of the articles printed in the local papers. Giving back for all that they received, the Army Air Corps staged shows and parades for civilians, as well as aided in fighting fires and preventing rat infestations.¹⁹ Armistice Day, November 11, brought the largest military parade in the history of the Clearwater area, with more than one thousand soldiers from the Air Corps, Marines, and Coast Guard in attendance. The local high schools, Clearwater and Largo, also participated. The parade began at exactly ten in the morning on Cleveland Street and Garden Avenue and proceeded west to the Municipal Auditorium for a program that included the sale of war bonds and stamps.²⁰

As Christmas drew near, the combined forces of the 588, 413, and 918 squadrons put on boxing shows, as well as a variety show at the Municipal Auditorium. Private George E. Reedy Jr. acted as master of ceremonies and introduced acts that included a group of cross-dressing soldiers that vastly amused the spectators.²¹ Roaring with laughter, families went home to celebrate the holiday. Astonishingly, Christmas 1942 proved to be a rather quiet time, with no DUIs given, no “large hauls made in jook joints,” and “only two negro youths . . . brought before [the] Magistrate on charges of fighting.” The reason given for this was that people were either too busy, did not have gas or tires to go anywhere, or were in the military.²²

Everything was not all rosy, though. In addition to soldiers making friends and getting shipped out to areas unknown, there were a few accidents at the Belleview. On December 17, the *Clearwater Sun* reported the death of Private Edward H. Douglas, aged twenty-two. He had been missing from the 918 for two days before his body was found at the bottom of an elevator shaft. A military investigation was under way, and the general belief was that it was an accident.²³ The following February there was an incident with a private from the 918 and the Southland Special on the ACL Railroad. Alex Ramsey either fell or put his own leg on the track, losing his right foot above the ankle. When aid arrived, they found the private with a tourniquet formed from his own belt. The engineer and fireman of the train did not see anything, but a Pullman

¹⁸ “Recreation for Servicemen,” *Clearwater Sun*, various dates throughout 1942 and 1943.

¹⁹ The largest forest fire at that time, in an area northeast of Dunedin, forced Fire Chief Martin to confer with the Army Air Corps official regarding aid to fight the fires. The cause was lack of rain in the area over an extended time. “Army to Aid in Woods Fires,” *Clearwater Sun*, 6 November 1942.

²⁰ “Greatest Military Parade Here Marks Armistice Day,” *Clearwater Sun*, 12 November 1942.

²¹ “Soldiers Give Show for Civilians,” *Clearwater Sun*, 23 December 1942. Dates for the Thanksgiving articles were 24 November 1942 and 25 November 1942.

²² “Xmas Quietest in Years—Russell,” *Clearwater Sun*, 27 December 1942.

²³ “Pvt. Douglas Dies at Belleair,” *Clearwater Sun*, 17 December 1942.

porter reported witnessing the private “stick his foot under the train.” Newspaper accounts have various examples of soldiers having a “gay, old time,” but according to Bill Tordoff, there was no time for trainees to have any fun. This begs the question of whether Private Ramsey had been looking for a way out.²⁴

The New Year brought in a new outlet for the troops in the Sparkling City: the *Clearwater Sun* ran columns created by the units. It began with “Dots ‘n Dashes from 588,” written by Private L. A. Leacacos at Fort Harrison, telling stories of life as a soldier.²⁵ Civilians in the area had an immense amount of curiosity, and rumors abounded in the area. One major rumor surrounded the issue of food. Some in the area suspected the Army of wasting food, a rumor that may have gotten its start from civilians looking in the Army’s garbage cans. As Bill Tordoff remembers from his KP duty: “we had a garbage can full of those Swiss steaks. We had to throw them out.”²⁶ Within a one-week period at the end of March 1943, the Army met the rumors head on in the *Clearwater Sun*. Captain Alfred Truitt prepared an article firmly denying that they were wasting food. As head of public relations, Truitt did a fine job explaining how serving a large number of people can create large problems. He compared the mess cook with “Mrs. Housewife,” reminding women in the area how difficult it is to cook for just one family with shortages and rationing. People were reminded that there was a war going on and “recruits undergoing a strenuous physical training program must be adequately fed.... Soldiers are rationed, too.” Some people were even complaining that the soldiers were taking food away from civilians by eating in the area restaurants, causing prepared food to be thrown into the garbage. To this Truitt responded that what was not served was used the next day and suggested that there might be those in the area who were trying to “stir up dissatisfaction,” which would be more dangerous than just rumors.²⁷

The following day, “a serious-faced Army officer,” along with the County Health Department, inspected area restaurants and other “eating places” in an effort to ensure that Army men were taken care of with regard to their diets.²⁸ Another article restating the explanation for supposed food waste was printed with even more detail regarding the Army menu. The comparison was made again to the housewife trying to serve her child nutritious vegetables that he may not like, such as spinach. Readers were asked to imagine the amount left over to be retained and used in the next meal until it is “spoiled or completely inedible,” at which time it would then be thrown away.²⁹ Soldiers, however, were asked to eat at their training centers by order of Colonel Eugene R. Householder. Not to be seen as making any concessions to complaining civilians, the Army ran another article in the *Sun*, this one with a new

²⁴ “Soldier Loses Foot under Train,” *Clearwater Sun*, 21 February 1943.

²⁵ Pvt. L.A. Leacacos, “Dots ‘n Dashes From 588,” *Clearwater Sun*, 1 December 1942, p 5.

²⁶ Tordoff interview.

²⁷ “Rumors of Army Wasting Food Here Are Denied,” *Clearwater Sun*, 28 March 1943.

²⁸ “Army Suspects Eating Places,” *Clearwater Sun*, 29 March 1943.

²⁹ “Army Says Foods Not Wasted at Base Here,” *Clearwater Sun*, 30 March 1943.



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

War Poster produced by the U. S. Government during World War II. Posters like this encouraged Americans to support the soldiers during wartime shortages.

tone of reprimand. The Army reminded readers once again that there was a war and that the military had a certain way of doing things. What they did and how they did it was often classified and was not the public's business.

In war and peace, the Army in this country confines itself to the important business of training troops. That's a big enough job. Whatever explanation it may make to the general public of its operations includes only that unclassified information which will not impede the effectiveness of this training program. However, it does attempt to describe to the citizens at home all they are entitled to know about what is, after all, a civilian Army preparing to defend and fight for the common good.

The article continued to remind the public that "far from 'living off the fat of the land,'" soldiers were having to ration, too. It also explained that mess preparations had changed as the number of men eating there had changed. Perhaps there had been some waste in the beginning, but it had been curtailed according to the number of men actually eating there.³⁰

At the request of Colonel Levy and Captain Truitt, county officials dined at the Belleview the next day. After dining on "roast beef, Irish potatoes, gravy, corn, carrots, cold slaw, hot chocolate, raisin bread and a cup cake," the mayor and members of the Chamber of Commerce went on a tour of the facility. What they saw confirmed what the Army had claimed and gave no basis to the rumors circulating the town. When they asked why they were given the tour, the answer was given: "if the public was not firmly in back of the army now, think what might happen if conditions got worse and the civilians were not backing the army." Ultimately, the *Sun* concluded that the "Army Wastes Less Food Than Millionaires," comparing the current use to that when it was a millionaires' resort.³¹ Added to this was the fact that the Army was salvaging everything possible: raked leaves for fertilizer, meat picked to the bones for soup, tin cans, fats, and greases.³²

With this outbreak of criticism, the halcyon days of the military in the Sparkling City seem to have ended. The weekly boxing programs, which had started as an outlet for soldiers and entertainment for civilians, were ended. The Army fights had been so popular that no fewer than one thousand fans crowded the arena on any given evening. However, the ring had broken down, with no funds to secure another one. On top of the monetary issue came more criticism of the Army. Some citizens complained that the fighters were living the high life while their own boys were training elsewhere, enduring long days with no respite from hard labor. What these civilians seem to have forgotten was that the Army fighters trained for the fights on

³⁰ "Soldiers Asked to Eat at Post at Meal Time," *Clearwater Sun*, 21 March 1943.

³¹ "Army Wastes Less Food Than Millionaires," *Clearwater Sun*, 4 April 1943.

³² "Army Leads Way in Salvaging," *Clearwater Sun*, 4 April 1943.

their own time after their own long and tedious military days. Whatever the issue, the decision was made to have fights at the Belleview for the Army only.³³

With renewed criticism and the war continuing for longer than expected, the Army attempted to convince the public of its usefulness. The month of March proved to be rat-infested in Clearwater, with the city sanitary inspector, T. L. Boteler, reporting that the rat population was on the increase. Merchants reported that as many as fifty young chickens had been killed by the rats. They requested that the Army aid in the hunting of the rats, as well as start an antirat campaign to educate the public. To this end, two privates were sent out on various evenings to search for where the rats were living and discover what could be done to eradicate the unwanted “saboteurs!”³⁴

The public had been kept aware of life at the training centers through the columns printed in the *Sun*. By reading “Inside the 918 Gate” and “On the Beam with 413th” the civilian population was informed of military life. Starting in January 1943, the *Sun* published these columns weekly. A couple of days apart, Staff Sergeant Chick Rosnick from the 918 and Private George E. Reedy Jr. from the 413 showered the people with news from the training lines at the Belleview. Rosnick, a physical trainer at the center, began his column answering “how does it feel to live in the swankiest hotel in the country?” The answer came from “Private X”:

It's like this. We have the softest mattresses on our hotel beds but they have to be always ready for inspection, so we can't lie on them. We have a million dollar golf course, but all we do on it is the hardest kinds of exercises and obstacle running. We have beautiful green tennis courts, but that's where we air our beds after carrying them down five flights of stairs. We have a spacious and fully equipped Recreation Room to be used in our leisure time, but I've forgotten what 'leisure time' means. We have lovely green velvet lawns, but we can't walk on them. We have a telephone in every room, but we can't talk through them. We're pounding out feet when the beautiful dawn breaks and we're knocked out when the glorious sun sets.

Other stories to lift the spirits of those training came, but at the same time proved the Army meant business.³⁵ Soldiers at the Belleview could visualize what it would be like if no war were being waged. While eating in the Belleview Dining Hall with its stained-glass windows or observing human nature in the A&R Recreation Hall, soldiers picked up a number of stories ranging from philosophy to favorite authors and women. One thing that occupied the mind of a rookie was “the delightful,

³³ “Army Puts Halt to Weekly Programs,” *Clearwater Sun*, 28 March 1943.

³⁴ “Army May Aid in Anti-rat Campaign,” *Clearwater Sun*, 17 March 1943, “Merchants Ask for Anti-rat Ordinance,” *Clearwater Sun*, 19 March 1943. George Loudon made the comment in the latter article that, “Rats are destroying hundreds of pounds of food right here in Clearwater,” and “Rats are our worst saboteurs!”

³⁵ Chick Rosnick, “Inside the 918 Gate,” *Clearwater Sun*, 10 January 1943.



Tampa Bay History Center Collection

Clearwater's Gray Moss Inn, pictured here, and the Fort Harrison Hotel would also house troops during World War II. Businesses boomed with the presence of thousands of soldiers in the area.

charming and exciting girl in a downtown drug store," or "the new girl at Reid's who dresses the hamburgers with quotations from Shakespeare."³⁶

With the troops in town delighting the young girls, where were the civilian boys to get their dates? Delmar Harris, a Clearwater High School student at the time, muses how the high school girls dated the soldiers, making it necessary for the high school boys to get dates from girls in Tampa. The streets of Clearwater would be crowded with people as they went to the dances and other forms of entertainment in the Auditorium. Harris recalls that the "big affairs were good entertainment."³⁷ Rosnick supported this when he reported that the fights and entertainment provided at the Auditorium created a "close knit" relationship between the "men of service and the community."³⁸ There were also times when Rosnick would act as matchmaker. In the March 14 column, he espoused the virtues of one lieutenant who had "reached the stage where he longs for home cooking and the sight of a little child." He also had a "most likeable personality," making him "Clearwater's Eligible Bachelor Number One...Clearwater Girls! TAKE OVER."³⁹

As "winter" settled in, the weather proved perfect for the soldiers to take advantage of the golf course not being used as an obstacle course. Sergeants and

³⁶ Rosnick, 19 January 1943.

³⁷ Delmar Harris, interview by Deirdre Schuster, 3 December 2008.

³⁸ Rosnick, 24 January 1943.

³⁹ Rosnick, "Six—Oh!—Nine," *Clearwater Sun*, 14 March 1943.

privates played a round together, proving that it was difficult to punish a soldier at the Belleview. Restricting a man to the “base” instead of letting him go in to town provided him with all sort of activities. There was the War Theater—located in the hotel—athletic facilities and games, and an Olympic-sized swimming pool. Let’s also not forget the grounds themselves for roaming and enjoying the wonderful atmosphere of the Sparkling City. Sitting in their rooms at night, the soldiers could listen to the bugler—Hollywood’s own Bob Candrea, who recorded trumpet sounds for Paramount Pictures. Even eating at the Belleview had its advantages. Private First Class Joe Reese became “stymied by a tangerine.” Apparently early for a date, he sat down in the Servicemen’s Center and noticed some tangerines. He “calmly peeled” and ate one, then another. He “lingered for a third . . . loosened his belt, took off his blouse, and sat down to the table with the biggest pile of tangerines.” After consuming forty-four of the luscious citrus, he declared that he would never eat another tangerine as long as he lived! It’s a wonder more boys didn’t join up just for the chance to stay at the Belleview.⁴⁰

In March 1943, the squadron numbers were changed, and a new one was added at the Belleview: 413, under the command of Captain I. J. Richard, became Group 601; 918, under Captain Frank Pruitt, became Group 609; and the new Group 612, under Captain George Dix, had the privilege of billeting in tents on the golf course north of the garage. With these changes came changes of the column names, too. “Inside the 918 Gate” turned into “Six—Oh!—Nine,” and “On the Beam with 413” became “Strictly G.I.” Staff Sergeant. Chick Rosnick continued to write the column under the new name. However, George Reedy, after a short stay in the Don Ce-Sar Hospital, was shipped out to Officer Candidate School. Private Floyd P. Jones took over for one week before finding “vital work elsewhere: radio,” so Privates Thomas L. Johnson and H. N. “Lucky” Rogers took over the last two installments of “Strictly G.I.” The last column appeared on March 21, and Rosnick’s column disappeared after the April 4 installment.

The end of the columns coincided with the intense criticism that the Army was facing from the civilian population. After reprimanding the public on the reason for soldiers training in the first place, the Army seems to have taken a 180-degree turn. Instead of cooperating and giving out information, the Army just stopped sharing particulars of the soldiers. One last article elucidated exactly what was going on at the Belleview. Soldiers were in the program for an extended time so they could be trained in the additional skills needed in the war. Defense against chemical attacks, bayonet drills, grenade practice, camouflage and concealment were added. It was explained that the war was revealing the need for new skills against a new enemy. Digging trenches and creating other types and methods of concealment were now part of the training regimen. To aid in the proper method of attack and defense with

⁴⁰ Rosnick, 8 February 1943; 14 February 1943. There was also an organ player—Edward Angulo. Unfortunately, there was no organ (21 February 1943).

a bayonet, a natural obstacle course was laid out on the Belleview grounds. Trainees had to hurdle barriers such as fallen trees, ditches, and muddy streams before coming face to face with the “enemy”—a straw dummy. Lectures on military rank, bearing, responsibility, appearance, and behavior were also part of the course.⁴¹

Earlier in 1943, Colonel Levy had escorted a group of county and city officials through the course and offered to let them try it out. “Like a swarm of bees,” they crawled and hurdled and ran through the course, denying the reality that one is not, truly, as young as he feels. As the physical trainer watched them leave with smiles of success on their faces, he knew what the morning would bring: “aching muscles, returned sciaticas, preschedule lumbagos, charley horses, rheumatisms, cramps, and a return of one-time athletic injuries. Today they played ‘soldiers at the front’” tomorrow they would decide with resignation and assurance that their future soldiering would be done on the home front.⁴²

For the soldiers, just as for the civilians that day, training was not all bad. Bill Tordoff fondly recalls marching out of the Belleview to the courses for training, all the while singing cadences he can sing with verve still today:

Around her neck she wore a yellow ribbon
She wore it in the springtime
And in the month of May
And if you ask me why the heck she wore it
She wore it for her soldier who was far, far away
Far away, far away
She wore it for her soldier
Who was far, far away

Another favorite was:

There sits a preacher sittin’ on a log,
With a finger on the trigger and his eye on a hog.
Amen! Amen!

The months following the criticism were full of rumors regarding the training centers being moved out to Lincoln, Nebraska. Confirmation of two Miami basic training centers moving to Mississippi and Texas came, with the leadership at the Belleair and Clearwater centers remaining silent. Even Senator Claude Pepper knew nothing. The Chamber of Commerce began the effort to find out exactly how the removal of the soldiers would affect the economy of the area.⁴³ As dredging of the bay opposite the Belleview in June was taking place, Congressman Lex Green commented that if the Army did move out of the hotels, some other federal project would take

⁴¹ “Army Tells of Making Rookies into Soldiers,” *Clearwater Sun*, 6 April 1943.

⁴² Rosnick, “Inside the 918 Gate,” 8 February 1943.

⁴³ “Army Is Silent about Rumors of Moving,” *Clearwater Sun*, 17 May 1943.



Courtesy of the Florida State Archives

Aerial view of the Belleview Biltmore, including the hotel grounds and golf course. Soldiers would cover almost every inch of the grounds during their training exercises at the resort.

their place.⁴⁴

Two weeks later, the Army cancelled the three one-year contracts in the area, along with hotels in the St. Petersburg and Miami areas.⁴⁵ Contrary to a *Tampa Tribune* article in 1970, the Belleview was not leased for three years, only one.⁴⁶ Along with the Fort Harrison and the Gray Moss, there were three one-year contracts that ended in the summer of 1943. Through all the criticism, the fact remains that having the armed forces in the area provided an economic boost. Utility receipts increased, as did post office receipts. Even though soldier's letters were mailed for free, parcel post and registered mail increased by more than 90 percent. During the first six months of the year, stamp revenues went up by \$2 million. Movie revenues and local businesses also saw an increase in profits. Any revenue lost from the vacating of the three hotels was expected to be replaced with revenues from other Army installations nearby in Dunedin, Oldsmar, and Largo. To that end, the Clearwater Transit Company was planning on extending bus service to those areas.⁴⁷

In August 1943, all three hotels were turned back over to their owners, and

⁴⁴ "Dredging in Bay near Belleview," *Clearwater Sun*, 7 June 1943.

⁴⁵ "Army Cancels Three Hotel Contracts," *Clearwater Sun*, 20 June 1943.

⁴⁶ Roy Bertke, "'Great White Queen' Still Reigns," *Tampa Tribune*, 27 December 1970.

⁴⁷ "Armed Forces Aid in Showing Record Business," *Clearwater Sun*, 28 June 1943.

plans were made to reopen for the winter season. The Gray Moss Inn was scheduled to reopen on October 1, and the Fort Harrison Hotel would open December 15.⁴⁸ The grand “White Queen of the Gulf” would not be so lucky. Even though losses at the hotel were “amazingly small,” after inspection by the Army and Kirkeby agents, the decision was made by Arnold Kirkeby to sell the hotel to local land baron Ed C. Wright for \$275,000 at auction. The Belleview remained closed during Wright’s ownership, but was renovated and sold to Bernie Powell. It reopened on January 10, 1947 and continued to prosper as the socially elite came back.⁴⁹ Clint Mitchell remembers working on the Belleview before the Army arrived and after it was sold to Powell.

The owner of Clearwater Paint Company, Mitchell has a memory that is long and clear. Youthful at eighty-one years of age, he eats breakfast and shoots the bull every Wednesday morning in a Largo diner. He recalls that there were catacombs under the Belleview Biltmore through which all the servants had to pass. To get to them, one had to travel on a little dirt road, reminiscent of a castle in Europe. Painting the Queen took time and money. To help expedite the effort, local decorators were called out and asked to decorate a room, often in the cottages. Once done, Powell would have a party at which the decorators were “advertised.” This ingenious plan saved the owners of the Belleview thousands of dollars.⁵⁰

Delmar Harris also remembers the Belleview as a young boy. He recalls one incident with the catacombs just before the military took possession. “There was a long trail under the hotel and in this tunnel they found a cache of German military rifles. It was a pretty good, high stack with Norwegian writing on the cases. Don’t know what they did with them, but there were always German tourists hanging around the tennis courts.”⁵¹ This could be a reason why the military moved in to the Belleview in the first place. As an easily reached and isolated location on the Gulf coast, the Belleview was ripe for espionage.

Today the Queen is ready for renovation—or, rather, restoration. Legg Mason purchased the Belleview in 2007 after Japanese owners threatened to level the historic heart of pine hotel. Local citizens successfully fought the danger. On May 1, 2009, the Belleview closed its doors for two years, and nothing will be left untouched. The glass nouveau entrance will come down, and the stage in the Starlight Room will be removed, along with a kitchen. Paint, wallpaper, and carpets will all be replaced in an attempt to restore the Belleview to its former glory. One thing that won’t change is the aura of majesty that she has always emanated.

⁴⁸ “Belleair Hotel May Reopen This Season,” *Clearwater Sun*, 6 August 1943.

⁴⁹ Prudy Taylor Board and Esther B. Colcord, *The Belleview Mido Resort Hotel: A Century of Hospitality* (Virginia Beach: Donning, 1996).

⁵⁰ Clinton Mitchell, interview by Deirdre Schuster, 26 November 2008.

⁵¹ Delmar Harris interview.