

## **PRIDE, VISION AND PATRIOTISM BUILD WITHAM FIELD**

The sleepy southern village of Stuart in the early 1940's was typical of rural America. Martin County was very poor. The few thousand permanent residents were reeling from the 1926 bank failures that wiped out most of their savings. Much County land had been seized for unpaid taxes. The County and its residents carried the burden of tremendous debt.

Life was difficult. For survival, residents were primarily dependent on tourism. Most provided services to the November to February visitors who came by car and train for sailfishing.

Residents were a hardy bunch determined to overcome hardship, and to make something of their town despite setbacks. Community leaders wrestled with the challenge of attracting more business and sorely needed tourists. They understood that future economic survival was tied to tourist access. With uncanny intuition, insight, and with tremendous foresight they anticipated the potential of the airplane. They decided the key to success in the future revolved around an airport.

It required a lot of faith on the part of community leaders to commit to a virtual unknown. The airport project required vision, perseverance and patience. The first challenge was to assemble a huge piece of land. The County had no money. Community leaders proceeded anyway supported by residents who had faith in the future and agreed that transportation was the key to improving the economic base of the community.

Much of the land assembled for the new airport was acquired at very low prices. Community-minded and patriotic sellers committed their own land to the project, retaining the right for ownership of the land to be returned to them should the land use ever change for anything other than an airport. And those rights of reversion remain in place today.

In January of '42 the citizens of Stuart, fed up with bureaucratic delays, successfully demanded that the red tape delaying airport development be eliminated. By February of 1942, the County Commissioners voted to honor General Douglas MacArthur proposing to name the new airport MacArthur Field.

Another fascinating aspect of this is the virtual unanimous support the new

airport had within the community. I scoured every issue of the Stuart News for the years 1941 and 1942. I couldn't find a single letter to the editor or article critical of the community need for an airport. Contrast that with the cacophony which is raised by the modern arrogant affluent every time the County Commissioners propose to improve the community infrastructure. It is my conclusion that citizens were more likely to put their Country and their Community ahead of their own selfish interest than is the case today.

German submarines were sinking freighters within sight of the beach in February as sleepy Stuart invested for its future economic survival. And WWII was soon to propel this out-of-the-way town onto the scene of world events. The country needed more than scrap metal; gasoline; and young men for the war. It needed newfangled airplanes. And it needed Stuart's outstanding weather to train pilots. The new Stuart airport was in the right location, at the right point in history.

As a patriotic gesture in March, Evans Crary offered the airport to the U.S. Government for use as a training facility. In October of 1942 the Navy accepted the town's offer and assumed operation of the airport in exchange for an \$800,000 payment to the County. The Navy then committed \$10 million to construct and operate a modern airport.

Tragic local news impacted everyone in August of 1942 when the War department informed the Witham family their son Homer, a pilot, had died in action. In that month there was more bad news for the Witham family, Ross was reported wounded and in the Naval Hospital.

Putting Stuart on the front page of U.S. Newspapers again in December, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox proposed that the new airport be named Witham Field, in honor of Homer Witham.

By the end of 1944, Witham field was ready. Squadrons of new Navy pilots flying the new "Hellcat" circled overhead, day and night, learning to land and take-off from the aircraft carrier replica painted on the East - West runway, complete with the traditional LSO station.

The Hellcat was the main shipboard fighter of the US Navy for the last two years of the Pacific War. It immediately outclassed its opponents, having higher speed and rate-of-climb. The aircraft was rugged, well-armored, and very maneuverable for such a

large machine. The arrival of the F6Fs in late 1943, combined with the deployment of the new *Essex* and *Independence* Class carriers, immediately gave the US Pacific Fleet air supremacy wherever the Fast Carrier Force operated.

Stuart residents welcomed the unending whine of F6Fs and their 2,200 horsepower engines that growled around the clock, day in and day out. The noise represented both a giant step towards the economic future of Stuart, and huge personal satisfaction from the massive community contribution towards the war effort.

Activity in the town grew, and people worried whether the community had sufficient housing to accommodate the young soldiers who soon would be training at Witham Field. Airport neighbors were too busy to worry about airplane noise as they supported the influx of young service men and women. The town admitted all men in the military to the Lyric Theatre for 25 cents. A new civic center and USO was built. Dances and picnics were held. The hospitality was so intense and friendly that many of the pilots who trained here returned to settle in the new Stuart.

Thousands of aviators received their training in the once small and sleepy town that was ultimately changed forever. Just as the citizens hoped when planning the airport in 1941, the airport attracted new business. Certainly the character of that sudden business was totally different than originally expected. But it is clear that Witham Field became a prime-factor in the economic success of Martin County. The citizens of Stuart made their sacrifices, made their commitments, and earned a unique place in history for their effort.

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Written for the Witham Field Airport Newsletter 01/2004