

War permanently altered local scene

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Editor

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World War II set the stage for the development of two landmarks on the Treasure Coast: Jonathan Dickinson State Park and Witham Field, the airport in Stuart.

The first local sign of preparation for war was the development of a school for advanced training for military pilots at Morrison Field in West Palm Beach. Morrison Field today is the Palm Beach International Airport.

The Corps of Engineers in 1941 was assigned the job of developing an auxiliary field for Morrison.

Martin County attorney Evans Crary Sr. proposed a site south of Stuart. The Army Air Corps asked for 640 acres. The county was to buy the land (at about \$10 an acre) and lease it to the federal government "until the emergency passes" when it would be returned to the county along with the improvements. As history proves, it was an inspired investment for the county.

Crary, real estate broker C. B. Arbogast and County Engineer Fred Stafford, all dead now, burned the midnight oil trying to get a big enough parcel together.

The need for the military airport suddenly became vital when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941. The land was purchased before the end of the year and a private contractor was ordered to work 24 hours a day, seven days a week constructing two runways.

One of those killed at Pearl Harbor was Rear Admiral Isaac Campbell Kidd. He was on the Arizona. His 81-year-old mother was a resident of Stuart in 1941.

On Feb. 5, 1942, South Florida's Congressman Pat Cannon and then-U.S. Sen. Claude Pepper announced that a \$15 million Army Signal Corps training school would be constructed on some 8,000 acres in southern Martin County.

The Signal Corps wanted that particular site because the rolling hills would be useful in the training exercises. The Corps of Engineers began work on the

school even before the formality of court approval of condemnation proceedings was completed.

This activity energized and changed the community. The sense of urgency was heightened on the evening of Feb. 26, 1942 when one or more German submarines torpedoed three oil tankers between Fort Pierce and Jupiter. One torpedo missed its target and hit the rocks near the shore on Jupiter Island. The explosion shook the ground for 40 miles up and down the coast.

The pitiful survivors were brought through the For Pierce and Palm Beach inlets by the Coast Guard.

Twenty-two merchant marine seamen waded ashore at Jupiter Island and got a hearty welcome from residents who had been partying in their Oceanside homes. Men pulled off expensive sport coats and wrapped them around the shivering sailors. More clothes were pulled from closets. One sailor described as swarthy and stocky wore a woman's silk dressing gown. The survivors were brought inside where drinks were pressed on them and trays of food were passed around. A sailor offered to mp up the sand and water the men were tracking into one beautiful home. He was told the mss was of no consequence. Offshore, pillars of fie could be seen rising into the night sky.

Wartime censorship was not fully in place, but after the story appeared, the *News* was ordered not to publish reports of submarine attacks. But there were other ships sunk in 1942 and 1943 – their fires could be seen from Hutchinson Island.

Martin County's first overseas casualty was Jack Matthews. Matthews was on convoy duty somewhere near Australia when his ship was sunk by a Japanese bomber. Matthews was still alive when he was pulled from the sea, but terribly burned. He died later on a hospital ship.

One his last furlough home, he had told his father that if the worst happened, he wanted to be buried at sea. He was.

Matthews had grown up in Stuart. He had been an altar boy at St. Joseph's Catholic Church.

Work proceeded at a furious pace on the signal school Facilities for 6,000 men were completed in less than five months. It was dedicated on July 4, 1942 and named for Col. William H. Murphy, a pioneer developer of military radio equipment. Col. Murphy was killed by the Japanese on Feb. 3, 1942.

On the day Camp Murphy was dedicated, 300 men were graduated from the school. Their training had begun before the camp was completed.

The U.S. Coast Guard asked for small boats to be used to hunt for German submarines in the Gulf Stream. Stuart Captains Toley Engebretsen and Earl Ricou volunteered themselves and their boats.

Martin County's quota for bandages between July 1 and Dec 1 of 1942 was 75,000. Miss Myrtle Dyer led the Red Cross bandage rolling effort that had its headquarters at the Episcopal Parish House.

A shortage of bottle caps cut off Martin and St. Lucie counties' supply of bottled beer.

In Aug., 1942, Paul Homer Witham, a navy pilot who was born and grew up in Stuart, was killed when he was shot down at Kiska in the Aleutian Islands.

His brother, Ross Witham, also was a Navy flier. He was on Ford Island in Pearl Harbor the morning of the attack. He saw the Arizona blow up and the Oklahoma capsize. Ross Witham is best known today for his work with sea turtles and other marine life studies.

Large advertisements for the sale of war bonds began to appear in the newspaper in the late summer of 1942. The advertisements often included photographs of Witham and Matthews.

The newspaper reported in September that County Engineer Stafford, a veteran of the trenches of World War I, was returning to duty to serve with the Corps of Engineers.

On Oct. 1, 1942, the Navy, without fanfare, took over the new airport in Stuart. They used it to train pilots in night combat.

The Harold Johns Post of the American Legion asked that the airport be named for Paul Homer Witham. Ross Witham says his family appreciated the gesture. "We thought it was a great honor that they would name the field for him."