

WORLD WAR II AIRMEN TRAINING IN CENTRAL FLORIDA

By Harv Buckner

After moving to Lakeland, I became an administrative hearing officer for the Parole Commission. That job required me to travel extensively, covering many counties in south-west Florida. I began to realize a commonality among the mostly small towns that I traveled to. Many of them had airports that had been World War II military training bases.

Let me stop here and say that there are several in the audience today that know a great deal more than I about some of this. Their military experience and education has made them knowledgeable about pre-war preparedness and readiness.

I'm not a military historian, but I am fascinated by this subject. I can just imagine the sky full of trainer planes and Florida towns full of eager teenagers (and that's what they were) anxious to complete their training and go out to face the enemy.

From what I've learned, the training typically consisted of three months basic training, three months basic aircraft training and three months flight training.

Most of the basic flight training of pilots was in Stearman biplanes. **SHOW** The Stearmans were built by Boeing and over 10,000 of them were delivered in the war years. Stearmans seated a student and instructor in in-line open cockpits. They were powered by 225 horsepower, seven cylinder radial engines. There was usually no cowling around the engines which gave the Stearman its distinctive look, with those seven big cylinders sticking out front of the two wings. The fuselage was stretched canvas over a steel tube frame. If you've flown in a canvas covered airplane, you know that it's a memorable experience.

Advanced flight operations spanned the whole range of military flying from fighters, bombers, air to sea combat and other specialty training. Some of the bases had dual functions, flight training and submarine detection. The sighting of German U-boats in Florida waters was quite common.

There was a rush to build training airfields in Florida during the early 1940's. Recalling that WW II was, for the United States, only a four year war, it is

remarkable that so much was accomplished in such a short time. Not only was the war fought and won in that brief period, but the entire industrial enterprise of the nation was converted to wartime purposes. Many of you come from the industrial North and you probably know that factory conversion history well. In Florida, there was no industry. But our contribution was the same as what brought you here, warm weather. Military planners knew that they could count on flying most days of the year, equipment required less maintenance, airmen required no cold weather gear and the climate conditions were similar to what the airmen would experience in the Pacific. Altogether, it was an ideal situation for training airmen.

Another factor in the placement of these training bases was the sparse population. Fewer buildings meant fewer things to crash into. They knew that the casualty count would be high. In the Tampa Bay region, a common term was 'One a day in the bay'. There were a lot of casualties.

Also, much of this buildup was soon after Pearl Harbor and the military was worried about clustering facilities close together. They didn't want any more 'battleship rows' like there had been at Pearl Harbor.

It was determined that small air bases would be built near scattered small towns, many of them in the center of the state.

Most of the bases that we'll talk about were operated by the Army Air Corps, but other branches also established bases in parts of the state.

In the eighty years since the end of World War II, there have obviously been major changes in the towns and surrounding areas where these airfields were located. However, some of the former air bases can still be identified. After the war, most of the bases were turned over to the towns and counties that they were in. Many became industrial parks, municipal facilities, ball parks, prison sites and general aviation airports. Some house museums where the war time history is documented and preserved.

Quickly, let me discuss some of the air bases in more detail. Beginning at the bottom of the map, the airbase at Arcadia is best remembered as a joint fighter training base for U.S. and British airmen. There's a cemetery and an annual remembrance for the few dozen British airmen who died in training accidents.

The Okeechobee airbase was used for bomber training and had the distinction of providing touch and go training for heavy bombers, mostly from Sebring. Can you imagine a flying Fortress doing touch and go's? That's something I'd like to have seen. The Okeechobee Airbase base reverted to being the municipal airport after the war.

The base at Sebring was called Hendricks Airfield. It housed squadrons of **SHOW** B-17 Flying Fortress and B-24 Liberator bombers. Those planes were same as ones housed at other Central Florida bomber bases.

The B-17 was the true workhorse of the European theater. 12,700 of them were built and they were well-loved by both the US and British flyers. Defended by five 30 caliber machine guns. It carried a maximum capacity of 8,000 pounds of bombs. The B-17 is believed to have dropped 40% of all allied bombs dropped in Europe during the war. It also had a reputation for durability with many of them returning with substantial damage.

The B-24 **SHOW** joined the B-17 as the most utilized heavy bombers during the war. 18,500 of them were built and 8,700 of them were built by the Ford Motor Company (the factory conversion effort that was mentioned earlier).

Though, it was sold as being faster and flying higher than the B-17, the B-24 missed the mark. It maxed out at a few thousand feet of altitude than the B-17. But it was a bit faster. The B-24 was built on a tricycle undercarriage and had a somewhat squared-off fuselage that earned the nickname, "Flying Boxcar".

So, back to the air bases, today, the Sebring airbase remains an airport and houses a major flight school. It also houses a sports car race track. You've no doubt heard of the 12 Hours at Sebring, a well-known endurance race. The track is carved out of the original concrete runways designed for heavy bombers. Those runways were configured in several different directions and allow for some interesting curves and hairpin turns. They say that the runways are really rough and make the race track a true endurance experience.

Avon Park remains as an Air Force base with its primary mission being management of the Avon Park Bombing Range. It is still in operation today. Base property also houses two major prisons and a juvenile correctional center. When I

first began going there for interviews and hearings, I was given use of a conference room in one of the original base buildings. When planes flew over, the rickety old windows rattled like tambourines. Those old barracks have now been torn down since the fire marshal demonstrated that they could burn quickly.

If you visit Avon Park, you might want to have a meal at the Hotel Jacaranda. It's downtown on Park Avenue and going there is like walking back into the 1940's. During the war years, the hotel was the center of social life. There's a nearby museum where much of Avon Park's military history is preserved.

Bartow Air Base was a fighter training base. It's probably the best preserved of all the WW II bases. It's a little way out of town and saw sparse use as an industrial park during the last half of the 20th Century. In recent years, it has changed quite a bit. However, the general layout of the base is unchanged. There's a very good museum there.

Lakeland had two fighter training bases. If you've been to baseball Spring Training in Lakeland, you're familiar with the stadium out on the shore of Lake Parker. That was Lodwick Field. When we moved there, some of the airbase buildings were still in operation, hangars and maintenance buildings. The stadium is constructed on what would have been the tarmac. The second airbase (Drane Field) is now Lakeland's municipal airport.

By the way, you guys from Michigan are sure to know that Lakeland has hosted Detroit Tigers spring training for 60 years, longer than any other town and ball club pairing by a long way. The Lakeland Tigers minor league team is also a big deal to the local folks.

An air base at Tampa was commissioned just before the start of World War II as MacDill Army Air Base. Its mission was bomber training. It was transferred to the Air Force in 1947 when that branch of the military was born. MacDill Air Force Base now houses Central Command (Centcom) which has jurisdiction over all United States military operations in the Middle East. Because of the Centcom mission, military personnel from many nations are stationed there.

A second base at Tampa, Drew Field, had the distinction of being the primary aircraft warning training facility for ground observation and radar. Civilian and

military personnel from all over the country came there for aircraft warning training. That was a vital function, recalling that it was feared that the mainland could be attacked at any time. The Aircraft Warning Observers' massive jobs were to monitor airplane traffic along the entire United States coastline as well as Northern and Southern borders. They needed to be proficient in distinguishing types of aircraft and determining if they presented a threat.

Drew Field is now Tampa International Airport.

The airbase at Orlando became McCoy Air Force Base and is now Orlando International Airport. It was a main heavy bomber training center with several smaller support bases in Central Florida. McCoy later housed a B-52 bomber squadron.

Kissimmee Air Base was a sub-base of Orlando and housed a fighter squadron.

The Zephyrhills Air Base trained fighter pilots. It is now the Zephyrhills Municipal Airport and you'd never guess that it housed a squadron of P-51 Mustangs **SHOW**. The Mustangs were first developed by North American Aviation for the British. Their reputation grew fast and they saw action in every combat area on the planet. It was a most reliable fighter and fighter bomber. It could fly faster and higher than any of the competition. 15,500 were built and they served well into the Korean War, even with the advent of jet planes. P-51's were armed with 30 and 50 caliber machine guns and each could carry 1,000 pounds of bombs and rockets under its belly.

The Brooksville Airbase was a bomber base. The former base is now the Brooksville-Tampa Bay Regional Airport. It is a busy hub for civilian and military air traffic. There is a Florida National Guard detachment of Blackhawk helicopters and fixed wing aircraft there. From time to time, the Blackhawks can be seen flying in formation around here. They're quite imposing and make a lot of noise. The former Brooksville Air Base property also now houses county buildings, the Sheriff's Office and jail, as well as a state prison.

The former training airbase closest to us is Leesburg. Most of us pass by it frequently. It's now the Leesburg Airport. During the war, it's mission was Joint Tactical Training with McCoy Air Base in Orlando.

If you're familiar with Ocala, you might be interested to know that the whole section of land from the Paddock Mall, nearly all the way to where Road 200 connects with Pine Avenue was airbase property (about three miles long). It was called the Jim Taylor Airbase and it housed two bomber squadrons. When I was in school, all of that land was fenced off and it served as Ocala's general aviation airport well into the 1960's. It's hard to believe that there was no commercial development from town, all the way out to what is now I-75, but that's how it was.

There is still a bombing range in the Ocala National Forrest. It's the Pinecastle Range, operated by the Navy. It's been in continuous use since early in WWII. I've been told by some Villagers that they can still hear ordinance exploding out there, although I can't verify that. The Navy does publish advance notification of bombing exercises.

If you're interested in seeing or learning more, as said, many of the former airbase towns have museums. I might recommend the museum at the Bartow Air Base, the Sun and Fun Museum at Lakeland or Fantasy of Flight on Interstate Four near Polk City.