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From Mosquito Clouds to War Clouds: The Rise of Naval Air Station Banana River

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THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

FROM MOSQUITO CLOUDS TO WAR CLOUDS:
THE RISE OF NAVAL AIR STATION BANANA RIVER

By

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ABSTRACT

Naval Air Station Banana River was created as a result of increased military appropriations to defend the Atlantic Coast of the United States of America. The Hepburn Board was charged with finding appropriate sites for new naval installations that could better protect American citizens from attacks along the coastline. After an exhaustive study, a site in Brevard County was selected to become a naval patrol sea plane base. County and city leaders in Brevard rallied around the construction of the Naval Air Station Banana River that they had lobbied the Hepburn Board to bring to their county. They threw their support behind the station throughout its construction and celebrated its commissioning in October 1940. Pearl Harbor brought changes to NAS Banana River as German U-boats stalked the Florida coast and the station's mission was expanded to include patrol duty, search and rescue, bombardier training, sea-plane pilot training, and communications research. Buildings sprang up in response to the increase in personnel needed to fill all of the programs.

Brevard County welcomed the sailors into their towns, homes, and lives. Although the base itself was isolated, there were a number of activities on and off base to keep the sailors busy. The county was felt the economic impact of the base with an increased number of employment opportunities, a rise in retail and food service profits, and a demand for additional infrastructure to support the station.

Naval Air Station Banana River was deactivated in 1947 to the dismay of the people in Brevard County. Their disappointment did not last long when a few years later the base was reactivated to serve as the headquarters of the newly formed Joint Long Range Proving Ground, a testing site for the American rocket and missile program. The existence of the Naval Air Station Banana River and the infrastructure created to support it helped to bring missile program, and a few years later the space program, to Brevard County.

INTRODUCTION

BREVARD COUNTY IN THE 1920s AND 1930s

In late 1938 a group of men arrived in Brevard County on a mission. They were members of the Admiral Arthur J. Hepburn Board, a federal commission established to investigate potential sites for the construction of a series of defensive naval bases. The board's decision a year later to construct a small naval air station at Banana River altered the future of Brevard County. In 1939, Brevard County, Florida was beginning to emerge from the economic depression that had gripped the nation since the late 1920s. That year proved a watershed event in the revitalization and development of the area. The small naval air station commissioned in October 1940 as Naval Air Station (NAS) Banana River would train thousands of pilots, bombardiers, photographers, mechanics, and many others through the course of the next six years. The lives of the men and women who passed through the station were forever changed. So too were the futures of those living in the surrounding municipalities and the community itself.

The foresight of the United States Navy in determining the need for additional bases was validated when the Japanese launched a surprise attack on American military installations at Pearl Harbor in 1941. The war transformed NAS Banana River from a defensive naval base to an important naval air station and the people of Brevard County from isolationists to interventionists. By the war's end, NAS Banana River had helped to reshape Brevard County's economics, society, and population. The infrastructure directly or indirectly created as a result of NAS Banana River would later serve as a major factor in bringing the space program to Brevard County.

The people of Brevard County experienced immense changes wrought by World War II, as did their fellow Americans across the nation. An abundance of scholarship exists on the military, social, and economic impact on American citizens. Many of the works available are broad anthologies encompassing a large number of themes while many more deal with more specific subjects. One aspect of the war that has not received much attention is the role of Florida.

Although the lack of scholarship suggests minimal involvement in World War II, Florida's participation in the war was extensive. Over 250,000 Florida men and women served in the military throughout the global conflict. Florida servicemen fought and died in every major battle of the war. On the homefront, Florida's place as a leader in agriculture helped in supplying the army and the nation with agricultural products such as citrus and meat. The high demand for citrus enabled Florida to surpass California's citrus output for the first time in the 1942-1943 harvest.¹ One of the most important services that Florida provided was opening its borders to thousands of servicemen and women for training. Because of the mild climate and almost year-round sunshine, Florida was a prime site for training bases. Throughout the conflict, over 2 million people trained at Florida's 227 bases with tens of thousands of those military trainees returning to settle permanently after the war's conclusion.² NAS Banana River was one of these bases and thousands of young men and women braved the sand and mosquitoes during their training. Many would later return to Brevard County to begin their post-war lives. Despite Florida's far-reaching contributions to the war effort, little scholarship is available for the study of World War II in the state. Even less material exists on Brevard County and none that specifically deals with NAS Banana River.

Although every major history of Florida covers the World War II era and its effects on the state both short-term and long-term, there are very few books and articles that specifically tackle the subject of World War II in Florida. Two of the most widely read Florida historians are Michael Gannon and Charlton Tebeau. Each of these authors includes a chapter on World War II in their survey histories of the state.

Michael Gannon in his *Florida: A Short History* covers the events of the state from European settlement through the 1980s. Included in this work is a section titled "World War II." Gannon's analysis of the war years includes the political situation in state government, the creation and maintenance of military bases throughout the state, the revitalization of the agriculture and the tourist industries, the virtual creation of a manufacturing industry, and the participation of Florida's citizens on the homefront. His conclusion is that World War II brought Florida economic recovery and immense population growth in large part because of the high number of trainees who returned to the state after the war. According to Gannon, the 46% growth in population during the

forties was both beneficial and problematic: “Florida would move up steadily up the list in national population rank and would experience all the economic benefits – and all the social problems and environmental dislocations – that rapid growth can bring.”³ Gannon spends a good deal of his World War II chapter dealing with the military installations but does not mention Brevard County or NAS Banana River.

Charlton Tebeau also dedicates a chapter of his *A History of Florida to World War II*. Like Gannon, Tebeau sees the war as a defining moment for the state: “The Seminole, the Civil, the Spanish American, and the First World wars had all affected the state dramatically but not like the one ushered in by the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.”⁴ Tebeau demonstrates the transformation of the state into an economic powerhouse by discussing the expansion of the agricultural industry and the effects of military bases on the contemporary and future economy. The civilian effort on the homefront is also given a lot of attention with activities such as coastal defense, Defense Councils, and the Civil Air Patrol given special mention. Tebeau does not, however, mention Brevard County and mentions NAS Banana River only in passing as a base for lighter-than-air craft.

Neither Gannon nor Tebeau includes formal footnotes or a formal bibliography. Gannon lists Florida history titles dealing with both general and twentieth century history. He acknowledges that a great deal of literature on Florida can be found in articles in publications such as the *Florida Historical Quarterly* and other regional journals. Tebeau’s select bibliography is set up much the same as Gannon’s with a reference to the many articles that can be found in the *Florida Historical Quarterly* and continues on to cite numerous titles on Florida in the twentieth century. None of the book titles cited in either book specifically discuss World War II or Brevard County.

In the 1990s, around the 50th anniversary of World War II, a small number of books were published specifically concerning Florida’s involvement in the war. Eliot Kleinberg’s *War in Paradise: Stories of World War II in Florida* is a collection of newspaper articles originally published in the *Palm Beach Post* during the anniversary celebrations. Kleinberg adapted his newspaper series, which was specifically written to tell “what had happened right here in Florida” and added introductions to each of the articles.⁵ The articles are divided into chapters each discussing a different aspect of the

war in Florida. Topics range from prisoners of war, Florida boys at Pearl Harbor, race relations, and the exploits of Palm Beach residents. Although most of the book caters to its original Palm Beach readers, it does expand to include non-local stories and themes. As for NAS Banana River, there is no specific mention in the text but the book features a postcard with the front gate of NAS Banana River and a small caption. As for research, Kleinberg's sources include personal interviews, World War II era newspaper articles, historical society documents, and a number of appropriate texts. *War in Paradise: Stories of World War II in Florida* lacks true analysis of the war but rather serves as a collection of stories concerning important topics about World War II in Florida.

Another book published about Florida during the World War II is *Florida at War* edited by Lewis N. Wynne. According to Wynne, World War II "provided the greatest change for Florida...and changed forever the direction of the state's economic, political, ethnic, and social forces."⁶ Wynne's book contains original and reprinted essays, which analyze a wide variety of World War II topics. Subjects discussed in the essays range from tourism, to African-Americans, industry, and the experiences of specific cities. Each essay contains a connection to Wynne's original purpose of illustrating how World War II changed economic, social, political, and ethical life in Florida. Although none of the articles refer directly to Brevard County or NAS Banana River, the book's focus on economic and social change makes *Florida at War* a helpful resource for this project.

Florida: The War Years 1938-1945 written by Joseph and Anne Freitus is an additional source that offers valuable information on the 227 military installations in Florida during the war. The authors approach the war in Florida as a turning point in state history. They attribute the significance of the war in Florida primarily to the location of the hundreds of military bases in the state: "The history of Florida during the war years from 1938 to 1945 is written in names – names of the many airfields, bases and the people who have returned to live in the Sunshine State."⁷ Most of the book is dedicated to providing a brief description of each military installation in Florida, whether large or small. The remainder paints a colorful picture of the issues that resulted from the influx of people into the state as well as the effects that the war had on Florida. The bibliography, however, is sparse and vague. The authors did utilize oral histories, consult various historical associations and institutions throughout the state, and use a number of

published materials such as Wynne's *Florida at War* and Tebeau's *A History of Florida*. Despite its academic shortcomings, *Florida: The War Years 1938-1945* is a useful source for this project. NAS Banana River is briefly described and is often mentioned.

Although scholarship available on World War II in Florida is scarce, finding information on Brevard County and NAS Banana River during the war is even more difficult. A number of comprehensive works exist on the history of Brevard County and they vary in depth of information and scope, especially when dealing with NAS Banana River. A recently published book on the neighboring Naval Air Station Melbourne is an additional source on Brevard County during the war.

Two major histories of Brevard County have been published in the last twenty years: Jerrell H. Shofner's *History of Brevard County* and Elaine Murray Stone's *Brevard County: From Cape of the Canes to Space Coast*. Elaine Murray Stone's history of Brevard County is a comprehensive historical survey in one volume. Jerrell H. Shofner's three-part history of Brevard County is one of the most inclusive of the county histories available. Volume II is of most use for this project and covers the years from 1920 to the present. Although both authors discuss NAS Banana River, Shofner's book focuses slightly more attention on the base because of its length. Regardless, with two major airbases and numerous outlying bases in Brevard County, both authors focus much of the war chapters on these installations and the activities that surrounded their maintenance. According to Shofner, "The war came closer to Brevard and its Atlantic coastal neighbors than to the inland areas," which he attributes in large part to the existence of bases such as NAS Banana River along Brevard's coast.⁸ While much of Shofner's research is based in newspaper articles and documents from various government institutions, Stone's bibliography consists primarily of secondary sources. Each of these works adds a great deal to the scholarship on Brevard county and even NAS Banana River but lacks in depth analysis of the station and its impacts on the community.

A further publication on the history of Brevard County enhances existing scholarship. *Brevard County: A History to 1955* by John M. Eriksen is more detailed in its information dealing the NAS Banana River. The book covers Brevard County's first one hundred years and has more room, therefore, to discuss topics like NAS Banana

River in more detail than the other Brevard histories. Eriksen discusses not only the establishment of the base but also goes into greater depth as to the effects it had on Brevard County. Topics such as the housing shortage and need for roads to support the base are covered in all three books but Eriksen also features more social history. He writes about a number of more off color themes like prostitution, local health problems, and entertainment available to the soldiers and community members. Eriksen's book is extremely well documented and utilizes a large number of primary sources such as manuscript collections, oral histories, and public documents. His list of secondary sources is equally exhaustive.

A final book that deserves mention is *US Naval Air Station Melbourne, Florida: Fighter Pilot Training Base World War II* by William R. Barnett. Barnett served as a fighter pilot trainee at the base during the war and much of the book is dedicated to the description of his experiences at the base. The book is more than a simple memoir as Barnett describes the establishment of the base, the goings-on at the installation and the relationship with Melbourne, the local town. Barnett utilizes several oral histories and several secondary World War II sources. *US Naval Air Station Melbourne, Florida: Fighter Pilot Training Base World War II* is significant primarily in that there are many parallels that can be drawn between NAS Melbourne and NAS Banana River.

World War II in Florida has been virtually ignored by scholars. One of the most important characteristics of the conflict that has been overlooked is the role of the military bases and their impact on the state of Florida. The state was reinvigorated in part because of the influx of federal money and military men and women, yet this is an area largely untouched by scholars. To study the effect that each base had on its surrounding community would be cumbersome and massive. This thesis, therefore, attempts to fill the gap by using NAS Banana River and the effect it had on Brevard County as a case study. NAS Banana River is unique and appropriate as a case study because significant change can be seen throughout Brevard because of the establishment of the base in 1939 and its continuation through the war. It is also an interesting base because its existence helped to spawn an even bigger economic upswing years later when it became a leading factor in bringing the space program to Brevard County.

To understand the impact that NAS Banana River had on Brevard County during the Second World War, it is important to be acquainted with the events preceding the establishment of the base in 1939. The history of Brevard County from the early 1920s through the 1930s is much like that of the rest of Florida. Brevard County just after World War I was still very rural and its economy was based largely on agriculture. Much of that changed during the 1920s.

Brevard's population in 1920 was 8,505 but the county and the state were on the verge of a new era. The "Roaring Twenties" did not bypass Florida as the state experienced an economic growth like no other before. People poured into the state lured by the pleasant climate and attracted by the promises of literature that touted the benefits of vacationing and living in Florida. As the tourists flocked to state, real estate speculators accompanied them and both left a considerable impression on Brevard.

Brevard County opened its doors and welcomed tourists from all over the nation. Local groups paid to have pamphlets placed in important newspapers and cities in the north to attract residents to the beaches and mild climate of Brevard County. Officials in Brevard County had reason to believe that attempts to draw tourists would work; the Florida East Coast Railroad ran regularly between Jacksonville to Miami and made stops in several Brevard County towns. Brevard cities welcomed the tourists and their dollars. Many municipalities competed for their business by establishing "auto camps." These auto camps were often well equipped with swimming pools, showers, and "all the modern conveniences." The Titusville Auto Camp claimed to have hosted 127 cars with 398 passengers from 20 different states in March 1921 alone.⁹ Thousands of tourists passed through Brevard County including President Warren D. Harding and Olympic swimming star Gertrude Ederle.

While tourists were hunting and fishing in Brevard's fields and rivers, real estate speculators were eying the area as an investment. The land boom of the 1920s exploded in Brevard as it did throughout Florida. Investors hoped to make large profits off the land in Brevard County. They sank millions of dollars into the construction of numerous subdivisions, roads, bridges, hotels, and casinos. The casinos became popular hangouts for tourists and residents alike. Promoters often hosted lavish parties and even auto races on the beach. One major promoter, Gus Edwards, established a small zoo as part of a

promotional ploy. Several of the zoo's inhabitants escaped, including an animal that had long been extinct in Florida, the armadillo. While originally a novelty in the small zoo, "the presence of armadillos was unique to the Cocoa area, but these prolific breeders soon spread throughout the state."¹⁰ As a result of these promotions and new building projects, Brevard County was a bustle of activity. Brevard County even became a stopping point and the hideaway home for the gangster Al "Scarface" Capone as he used the waters off Brevard to smuggle alcohol into the United States from the Bahamas.

The boom reached its peak in 1925 but quickly busted following the failure of countless banks because of over speculation and a deadly hurricane that devastated South Florida in 1926. Many of Brevard's planned subdivisions went unfinished as promoters and speculators left the area broke. Yet all was not lost. The real estate boom helped to build up much of the county's infrastructure. Many of the roads and especially the bridges were useful in later years when NAS Banana River was created. The economic ramifications of the land bust brought the Depression to Brevard County even before October 1929. The stock market crash only compounded the economic problems in Brevard.

The Depression in Brevard was difficult for its residents. Tourists no longer flocked to the area and many of the cities were on the verge of bankruptcy. As the economic downturn continued, "bonds were called, banks failed, homes and businesses foreclosed. Fine new hotels stood empty throughout Brevard, up for sale with no buyers. Roads fell into disrepair; projects and homes already begun were abandoned."¹¹ Many of the county's residents were forced back onto the farms while the businesses in the urban areas faltered without customers. One of those failed businesses, the Union Cypress Company, which built a railroad into the swamps, was forced to dig up its rails and sell them to a company in Ft. Pierce. Ironically, the "company's scrap metal was loaded on a steamer bound for Japan, perhaps to be used by the growing Japanese Imperial Navy."¹²

The county and city governments in Brevard could do little to help their residents because they were in default on most of their loans as well. Most municipalities were barely able to function and the situation was made even more challenging when residents were unable to pay even the small amount in taxes that the cities were allowed to collect. The situation got so bad that "there was talk of closing the county government and of

letting the prisoners out of jail.”¹³ This lack of money also hurt the school system in Brevard. A group of taxpayers suggested that the schools shorten their school terms to save money but the superintendent refused to enact such a measure. Instead, teacher pay was drastically cut and rules were passed that prohibited schools from being located within ten miles of one another.

While the local governments could provide little relief for their residents, the citizens of Brevard attempted to deal with the crisis. A group of 75 taxpayers formed a taxpayer league and put pressure on the county commission not to raise taxes. Other citizens formed a county relief committee, which was able to employ 800 men on projects such as repairing buildings, cleaning ditches, and working on roads.¹⁴ Relief also came from agencies such as the American Red Cross. While these attempts helped to relieve some of the pressure, it was not until the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932 and the implementation of the New Deal that the economic situation in Brevard County was gradually alleviated.

The first affects of the New Deal were felt in 1933 with the opening of several unemployment offices in the county. Shortly afterwards, the Civil Works Administration (CWA) arrived in Brevard and began to employ local labor for a variety of projects. Almost 700 people were assigned to these projects and were paid between 30 cents and \$1.00 per hour for a thirty-hour workweek.¹⁵ The CWA workers were responsible for the construction of a landing strip for the new airport in Melbourne, for building a community center in Cocoa, and even excavating Indian mounds under the supervision of two experts from the Smithsonian Museum. Other New Deal programs employed the citizens of Brevard including the Civilian Conservation Corps, the National Youth Administration, and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) began to employ people in 1935 and “between mid-1935 and mid-1936, the agency spent \$104,969.33 on local projects in addition to other funds expended on state projects within the county.”¹⁶ WPA projects included the addition of a hangar to the Melbourne airport and later in 1940 building a state road that would lead to the newly constructed NAS Banana River.

By 1939, the economic situation was beginning to look up for Brevard County. The New Deal had helped to ease the effects of the Depression but tourism and other

industries were still not back to pre-Depression levels. It would take World War II to bring the community back to the levels of positive economic growth.

This thesis will attempt to show how NAS Banana River stimulated growth in Brevard County. The first chapter will focus on the creation of the base and its role in the defense of the eastern coast of the United States. Chapter two will begin with Pearl Harbor and outline the wartime mission of the base as well as focus on the lives and duties of the men and women stationed at NAS Banana River. The third chapter will take a look at the communities that had contact with the base during the war and the extra-curricular activities that they provided for the sailors. Finally, chapter four will discuss NAS Banana River after World War II and its contributions to attracting the space program to Brevard County.

CHAPTER ONE

THE CREATION AND EARLY MISSION OF NAVAL AIR STATION BANANA RIVER

While the newspapers of Brevard County were reporting on the success of the latest Jubilee and the performances of the local high school sports teams, the situation in Europe and Asia was growing increasingly gloomy. By 1938, Germany's Adolf Hitler had remilitarized the Rhineland, annexed Austria, and moved into the Sudetenland following the Munich Conference. Italian dictator, Benito Mussolini invaded and conquered the African nation of Ethiopia. The Empire of Japan ravaged China as it pushed towards total victory over its neighbor. The United States remained a spectator to these events. Scarred by their experiences in World War I, Americans were staunch isolationists and had signed numerous treaties following World War I that illustrated the country's unwillingness to be drawn into another world conflict. While most Americans, including Brevardians, chose to disregard the actions of the belligerent foreign powers, the United States government could no longer afford to ignore the threatening trends in foreign policy. Although the United States continued to be neutral, a number of laws were passed to shore up the defensive capabilities of American coastlines. Despite their cavalier attitude towards global events, the citizens of Brevard were about to become an important part of this defensive buildup.

The American military had been significantly downsized since the end of World War I. The Washington Naval Conferences of the 1920s severely limited the size of the United States Navy. The total demilitarization attitude of the 1920s diminished during the 1930s as the menacing rumbles of war abroad led to increased military appropriations. Led in part by Representative Carl Vinson of Georgia and Representative Park Trammell of Florida, Congress began to expand the Navy in 1934. The Vinson-Trammell Naval Expansion Act of 1934 "authorized further new naval construction up to the full limit provided by the naval limitation treaties and the necessary replacement of overage vessels."¹⁷ Despite additional appropriations after 1934, the Navy continued to

remain small compared to the growing navy of Japan, the biggest threat the American power on the seas.

Events of 1937 convinced leaders in the American government that expansion of the U.S. Navy might be necessary. Japan was dominating its war with China and the brutality of the Japanese attacks alarmed leaders in Washington. Many Americans were shocked by reports of rape, murder, and destruction in Chinese cities, especially Nanking. The American public's attention was again captured following the attack on the *U.S.S. Panay*. The *U.S.S. Panay* had been evacuating Americans from Nanking when it was hit and sunk by Japanese airplanes. The incident did not provoke war between the United States and Japan but it signaled cooled relations between the two powers. It also forced Americans to realize that neutrality did not necessarily mean complete safety from international events. In his State of the Union Address to Congress on January 3, 1938, President Franklin D. Roosevelt acknowledged the need of the United States to maintain its defensive capabilities:

In spite of clear determination of this nation for peace, it has become clear that acts and policies of nations in other parts of the world have far-reaching effects not only upon their immediate neighbors but also upon us. Resolute in our determination to respect the rights of others, and to command respect for the rights of ourselves, we must keep ourselves adequately string in self-defense.¹⁸

The passage of the Vinson-Trammell Naval Expansion Act in May 1938 was evidence of Roosevelt's and Congress's cautious move towards building up the American military capability.

The second Vinson-Trammell Act increased the American Navy's capabilities far more than its predecessor passed in 1934. The 1938 Naval Expansion Act increased the numbers and tonnage allowed for combat vessels and required the naval air program to have no fewer than 3000 planes. The new act also authorized \$15 billion for research and development of new types of naval craft.¹⁹

The 1938 legislation also called for the defense of the American coastline and territories. The Naval Affairs Committee of the House of Representatives, headed by Rep. Vinson, inserted a new provision while the bill was under consideration: "The Secretary of Navy is authorized and directed to appoint a board consisting of not less than five officers to investigate and report on the need, for purposes of national defense, for

the establishment of additional submarine, destroyer, mine and naval air bases on the coasts of the United States.”²⁰ The committee was to report to the Speaker of the House with its findings. The addition was approved by the Senate and included in the final version of the Naval Expansion Act as Section 10. This small addition eventually altered the future of Brevard County.

President Roosevelt signed the Vinson-Trammell Act into law on May 17, 1938, and work began soon after. Nominations for the officers to serve on the Board were made shortly following the bill’s passage. Rear Admiral Arthur J. Hepburn was selected to chair the board. Hepburn had been a career officer in the Navy and had held numerous high positions within the Navy. The committee, which was known as the Hepburn Board, was “ordered to convene at the Navy Department at 10:00 a.m., on Friday, July 15, 1938, or as soon thereafter as practicable.”²¹ Hepburn Board members spent that summer and fall poring over old reports and conducting investigations of their own to determine the best sites for the establishment of the required bases. The Board was considering locations along the Atlantic Ocean, the Pacific Ocean, the Gulf of Mexico, and in American held territories abroad such as Guam and Midway.

Although the legislation called for the investigation into a variety of different bases, the Hepburn Board ruled out the need for additional destroyer, submarine, or naval bases early in their investigation. They did, however, unanimously agree, “that additional air bases are needed. It is further the opinion that such bases are needed for both carrier planes (land planes) and patrol planes (seaplanes).”²² The Board also determined the basic criteria for site selection, which included but were not limited to accommodating terrain, housing capabilities, sufficient water depth, relative proximity to major thoroughfares, adequate local labor, and good weather. Based on these conditions, the Hepburn Board narrowed down their options. Each potential site was thoroughly investigated by the Board. Members of the committee and their staff personally visited prospective sites unless the documentation they obtained negated the need for a trip. The Hepburn Board submitted their recommendations to the Secretary of the Navy in early December 1938.

The report delivered to the Secretary of the Navy was not a radical document. The Hepburn Board understood that Congress and the President wanted an expansion of

the naval establishment but not an all out mobilization. In their findings they continuously stressed, “the specific recommendations submitted are limited to the necessities of the present authorized combatant strength of the navy in peace time operation.”²³ The defensive capabilities of the U.S. Navy, therefore, were the primary focus for the Board. The report reflected earlier decisions regarding the need for naval air bases over submarine, destroyer, and mine facilities; priority was placed on creating naval air installations to increase the ability of both the Pacific and Atlantic fleets to operate properly. Members claimed that the flight capability of the Navy was severely inadequate in every area and advised that the Navy follow a program of maintenance, for the existing aircraft and their shore establishments and growth, so that the number of planes in the U.S. Navy would meet the numbers allowed in recent legislation. The increase in machinery would require a jump in the number of air bases required to house the aircraft and train their crews. Although the report included recommendations for other types of naval facilities, air bases were placed first on the priority list.²⁴

The Hepburn Board’s suggestions for expansion were ambitious, which was acknowledged in their report: “Even with the restrictions the Board has imposed upon itself to limit its recommendations to immediate and clearly imminent necessities, the project as a whole is one of very considerable magnitude.”²⁵ Despite the size of the proposed program, the Board considered it small compared to what would be required during wartime operations. Members considered the plan to provide a viable peacetime navy, which could and would increase in size if the nation went to war. The Board found that the Atlantic Coast desperately needed attention to make it adequate even in peacetime.

The United States Fleet had been based in the Pacific Ocean for most of the last two decades. With the exception of World War I, Britain, France, and the other nations sharing the Atlantic Ocean were non-threatening and the American Fleet was not required in great numbers in that theatre of the world. Since the Spanish American War, however, the U.S. understood that its most promising opportunities and potential problems were in the Pacific. As a result, most naval expansion was focused in that area. The Hepburn Board determined that only one major naval air base existed on the Atlantic Coast since most air bases had been constructed to boost the Pacific Fleet. Since naval air facilities

were the Board's number one priority, they saw this as a severe deficiency, which needed to be corrected. In their report they recommended that in order "to meet normal operation, as well as war emergency, three major air bases on the Atlantic continental coast are necessary."²⁶ Two of these bases could be created as part of already existing Navy Fleet installations that left much of the southern coast undefended. The third major air base, therefore, was to be built somewhere along the southern coast.

During early investigations by the Hepburn Board, Charleston, Savannah, Jacksonville, Miami, Key West, and Tampa were chosen as the most attractive sites for new naval air bases along the southern Atlantic coast. It was concluded, however, that Florida's east coast logistically presented the best spot for the Southeastern Base. There was also concern about the vulnerability of the Florida coast to enemy invasion. A major naval air base in Florida, therefore, would serve a major defensive function and help to deter any ideas of an enemy attack.

Upon final study the Board decided that the best site for the third major naval air base was Jacksonville, Florida. Jacksonville was recommended in the Board's final report but with some shortcomings. One of the major problems was the lack of a suitable area for the operation of patrol planes. The Navy primarily used seaplanes for patrol missions but the water depth and coverage around the proposed site was inadequate. The Hepburn Board offered a solution:

These shortcomings can be met and additional highly advantageous operating facilities can be obtained by the construction of an outlying operating seaplane area near Jacksonville. A suitable site for such an adjunct to the main base exists in the lower reaches of the Banana River near Cocoa Beach, Fla. Such an outlying operating area must be considered to be an integral part of the Jacksonville development.²⁷

The final report, including its recommendations for the Southeastern Base, was given to the Secretary of the Navy who delivered it to the Naval Affairs Committee of the House of Representatives as required by the Vinson-Trammell Act.

The people of Brevard County first heard about the Hepburn Board and the proposed airbase along the Banana River in January 1939. Citizens immediately began inquiring about the potential military installation. The letter writing campaigns were focused primarily on the two Florida Senators, Claude Pepper and Charles Andrews, and

Representative Joe Hendricks. Senators Pepper and Andrews represented the entire state and were, therefore, more preoccupied with state-wide business. Representative Hendricks became the driving force in Congress for the people of Brevard and their airbase. Gus Edwards, a local realtor, developer, and lawyer, wrote to Representative Joe Hendricks in Washington: “The morning paper carries a Washington Dispatch which states that Jacksonville, Miami and Cocoa Beach are recommended by the War Department as sites for air and naval bases...Please find out all you can about this and write me at once and oblige.”²⁸

By January 16, the town commission in Cocoa Beach had drafted a resolution offering its services: “the town of Cocoa Beach does hereby offer its full cooperation toward the development of the said outlying patrol plane operating area in the lower Banana River, and will furnish the United States Government all in its power toward the development of the said operating area.”²⁹ While the newspapers, citizens, and towns of Brevard County were praising the findings of the Hepburn Board and pushing for the adoption of its recommendations, the Committee on Naval Affairs in the House of Representatives was beginning to question the findings in the report.

Representative Carl Vinson, primary sponsor of the Naval Expansion Act of 1938 and his colleagues in the Naval Affairs Committee had doubts about the suggested location of the Southeastern Air Base. Hearings before the Committee on the proposed base began in late January 1939 and despite a plethora of favorable resolutions submitted by various organizations in Brevard County and in the Jacksonville area, the recommendations of the Hepburn Board received criticism. Many thought that the base should be located in Miami and not in Jacksonville as proposed. The Naval Affairs Committee decided to reconvene the Hepburn Board to conduct additional investigations regarding the location of a Southeastern Air Base. The Board was ordered to meet in late February to begin their second evaluation.

The people of Brevard County were appalled to discover that their hopes for a naval air base were being challenged. In a telegram to Representative Joe Hendricks, the Board of County Commissioners listed the numerous advantages of locating a base in Brevard and pleaded with the Congressman to do everything in his power to promote the county: “Please arrange for Chairman Vinson to inspect our location and wire ahead so

we can make all necessary arrangements to receive you and committee...your district has them all beaten for natural advantages.”³⁰ Several prominent and politically active citizens decided that additional action was needed. The Brevard County Naval Air Base Committee was formed shortly after word of the re-evaluation reached Brevard. Seeing an opportunity, many in Brevard, including the newly formed Naval Air Base Committee, began lobbying for the Banana River site to become the main base rather than simply an outlying station.

Brevard County officials understood the economic implications of having a military base in the county. Once the recommendations of the Hepburn Board were challenged, Brevard County responded with the Naval Air Base Committee and an expanded plan. By late February, just before the Hepburn Board and the Naval Affairs Committee were to meet, letters began to flow into the office of Representative Joe Hendricks lobbying him to push for the main Southeast Air Base to be located at Banana River. Representative Joe Hendricks, however, did not agree with this tactic. Hendricks believed that Brevard County would be better served by helping Jacksonville secure their site for the Southeast Air Base because it would ensure Banana River of an outlying installation. By promoting a main base at Banana River, Brevard might hinder Jacksonville’s chances, which in turn could eliminate Brevard County as a potential site completely. According to Hendricks, “This outlying operating area would bring an expenditure of \$3,500,000 to Brevard County and in addition to this certain monthly pay rolls and other expenditures...if Jacksonville is given up I shall immediately try to get them to consider Banana River for the main base.”³¹ Representative Hendricks urged secrecy with the matter so as not to irritate their allies in the project in Jacksonville. Despite his warnings, the Naval Air Base Committee hired a Jacksonville engineering firm to develop a site plan for a potential main naval air base at Banana River.

The engineering firm of G.A. Youngberg and Associates was instructed by the Naval Air Base Committee to create a preliminary study of the Banana River area and its potential as a major naval air station. The report from G.A. Youngberg and Associates was favorable for the establishment of a full-scale naval installation. Contained in the document presented to the Naval Air Base Committee were numerous advantages of the site including the favorable weather, safe navigating conditions, the willingness of the

county and state to provide access roads, railroad connections, and land, reasonable cost of developing the area, and a central location so that “all portions of Florida will benefit from the protection offered by this location.”³² The report also included cost estimates for the development of a seaplane base, an entrance channel, a turning basin for aircraft carriers, and jetties with the total estimated cost for the Navy being \$9,100,000.³³

The Brevard County Naval Air Base Committee authored its own report using the results of the engineering survey. The Committee’s report elaborated on the findings of G.A. Youngberg and Associates. Statistical data was gathered and broken down. Climatic conditions, for example, were broken down into the average hours of fog per month and a comparison of the number of rainy, cloudy, partly cloudy, and clear days were recorded in Merritt Island, Jacksonville, and Miami. Other favorable factors were provided such as the existence of the Melbourne-Eau Gallie Airport and nearby fresh water lakes that could be used in connection with the base. The report, *Statement on Establishment of Naval Air Base in the Lower Reaches of Banana River*, totaled thirteen pages.³⁴

Armed with this information, three Brevard County citizens, A.G. Porcher, C. Sweet Smith, and Locke Davidson, left for Washington to present their findings and “persuade Washington officials that the Congressional committee expected to visit Florida next week for a further inspection trip should stop over in Brevard county to inspect the site that is being proposed for the air base.”³⁵ Their trip to Washington was brief because shortly after they arrived, the group learned that the Hepburn Board and the Naval Affairs Committee were meeting in Miami and were planning a trip to see the Banana River site on March 2.

The Hepburn Board reconvened February 28, 1939 in Miami where the entire Naval Affairs Committee had shifted its hearings. In a joint session, they determined that the two groups would visit each potential site for the Southeast Air Base and a decision would be made on the location of the base following these investigations. Jacksonville and Banana River were scheduled for March 2 following visits to Miami, Fort Lauderdale, and Key West. Local authorities at each potential site were given permission to accompany the federal officials and were encouraged to present them with briefs summarizing the financial, legal, and engineering feasibility of their locations.

Brevard officials were ready with their report, when “two large sea planes, bearing members of the Naval Affairs Committee of Congress, and members of the Hepburn Committee...arrived at Eau Gallie...to inspect a proposed site for a base in the lower reaches of the Banana River.”³⁶ Representative Joe Hendricks accompanied the groups during their physical investigation of the Banana River area. Following the trip to Jacksonville and Brevard County on March 2, the Committee and the Board inspected sites at Fernandina, Florida, Brunswick, Georgia, Savannah, Georgia, Parris Island, South Carolina, and Charleston, South Carolina. On March 7, the Hepburn Board began its second round of deliberations in Washington.

While the Hepburn Board mulled over its decision, the Brevard County Naval Air Base Committee hoped that it could continue its quest to become the site for a major naval air station. On March 7, the Naval Air Base Committee approached the Brevard County Board of Commissioners requesting funding for a trip to Washington. The second trip to Washington in support of Brevard County’s desire to acquire an air station was approved and given \$2,500 for expenses. Three members of the Naval Air Base Committee, one County Commissioner, and a representative from Melbourne left for Washington “to appear before the Hepburn Board to present data which will show the advantages of the Banana River as a site as a Naval air base.”³⁷ They appeared before the Board on March 14 and reported back with high hopes but nothing definite.

The second meeting of the Hepburn Board lasted three weeks and a supplemental report was presented to the House Naval Affairs Committee on March 21, 1939. The report listed each site considered and its advantages and disadvantages. The efforts of Brevard County officials did not go unnoticed by the Hepburn Board. They acknowledged Brevard’s proposal and included an evaluation of the site as both an outlying base for Jacksonville and as a major air base. Although they considered Banana River strategically “as well situated as any location in the Southeast,” the Board concluded that it “is not suitable for development as a major air base.”³⁸ All was not lost for the citizens of Brevard County. The Board decided that the location had many benefits. According to the report, Banana River was ideal for the construction of a patrol plane base: “The Banana River area is so valuable for this purpose that the Board

considers that sufficient land for a site should be provided to make it an adjunct for any major air base which may be developed in the Florida area.”³⁹

The report showered praise on Banana River in its evaluation of the Jacksonville site as well. The Board considered the Banana River site a necessary addition to the Jacksonville base and favorably commented on its being “ideal as can be found as a landing place under conditions of poor visibility...and excellent area for peacetime training” and “as suitable as it is possible to find for patrol plane operation in war.”⁴⁰

The final recommendations of the Hepburn Board’s second report were that only Jacksonville and Miami could be considered legitimate sites for a major naval air station. The Board, however, concluded that the base should be established at Jacksonville with an outlying base at Banana River. The members of the Brevard County Naval Air Base Committee praised the Board’s report and were overjoyed to see that despite not being chosen as a major air base, an estimated \$1,800,000 was being brought into Brevard’s economy. Representative Hendricks was given a great deal of credit in local newspapers and personal correspondence. Accolades were also bestowed upon the Committee. Representative Hendricks was quoted in *The Cocoa Tribune* as saying, “Not a single backward step has been taken by the Brevard county delegation in Washington since they started work here...every bit of their work furthered the plans to get a recommendation for a base in Brevard county.”⁴¹

The House Naval Affairs Committee accepted the Hepburn Board’s final recommendation but not without a fight during the debate. Representative Pat Cannon from Miami attempted to shift the main base to Miami but failed. Another attempt at moving the base that would have pleased the people of Brevard but it, too, was voted down; Representative Cole of New York tried unsuccessfully to move the main base to Banana River, but failed by a vote of 17 to 3. The Board’s selection of Jacksonville was finally made official by the House Naval Affairs Committee 17 to 7.⁴² In the Senate, Senator Charles O. Andrews of Florida proposed an amendment to the naval air bill that would approve the Hepburn Board’s conclusions about Jacksonville and Banana River. The amendment easily passed and the naval air bill flew through the Senate Naval Affairs Committee. Additional good news came from Senator Andrews, a member of the Senate Naval Affairs Committee:

Senator Andrews is quoted in the press as stating that the \$1,800,000 expenditure for the patrol base in the Banana River in this county would only pay for the preparation of the site, and that additional money would be necessary for hangars and other equipment...since the figures were from Senator Andrews' office a revision must have taken place and evidently more money will be spent on the Banana River patrol base than was first thought necessary.⁴³

Both houses of Congress passed the Naval air base bill and President Roosevelt signed it into law on April 25, 1939, thus officially authorizing the construction of a naval air base at Banana River.

Although the Naval air base bill allowed for the creation of a naval installation at Banana River, it did not specify when construction would start. Brevard County officials were hopeful that they would not have to wait very long. Their high hopes were justified when a land survey crew arrived in Brevard in mid-May. The County Commission decided that they, too, needed to make the necessary preparations for the construction of the base. Chairman A. Fortenberry contacted the Florida State Road Department requesting that immediate improvements be made on the sand road leading to the potential Banana River site.

By June 6, 1939, Commander W.M. Angus, Public Works Officer of the Seventh Naval District, with the help of officials from Melbourne, Cocoa, and Eau Gallie, selected the final site for the Banana River base. The location decided upon for the new Naval Air Station a thin strip of land located just south of Cocoa Beach between the Atlantic Ocean and the Banana River. In the same month, the Naval Air Base Committee enlisted the help of Representative Joe Hendricks to put pressure on the state to speed up the construction of roads and bridges leading to the base. According to C. Sweet Smith,

It is going to be necessary for the State Road Department to construct a new road from Cocoa to the Ocean and south the Naval Air Base, and from Eau Gallie Beach north to the Base. Also, the present bridges from Cocoa to the peninsula are wooden and all of the naval officials whom we have contacted have indicated that these would not be satisfactory and that it is essential that proper causeways and permanent structures be constructed.⁴⁴

Hendricks acknowledged the request but could do little but inform the Committee that a naval officer was being sent to Florida to supervise the construction of the Jacksonville and Banana River bases and suggest that he could be of more assistance.

That officer, Commander Carl H. Cotter, was appointed to oversee the construction of the Jacksonville base in August. He initially told Brevard County officials that construction of the Banana River base would not begin until the Jacksonville base was well under way. A few weeks later, however, the Commander began to speed up the tedious procedure of acquiring the land needed to construct a base at Banana River. Condemnation proceedings began in October and the Navy took possession of additional land in November. Many Brevard residents agreed with the conclusions of *The Cocoa Tribune*: “The fact that steps have been taken to acquire the land area for the patrol base leads to the belief that because of recent international developments...plans have been changed and work on the patrol base will go ahead at an early date.”⁴⁵ Commander Cotter also encouraged the State Road Department to begin construction of the requested roads and bridges.

County leaders continued their efforts on behalf of the naval air station. The Brevard County Naval Air Base Committee continued to put pressure on the Navy to speed up the construction at the base because they knew that it would help to accelerate their own economy. Their hard work paid off when Brevard received good news in late November. Commander Cotter announced that the Navy would be accepting bids for clearing 260 acres of palmetto brush out at the Banana River site and for the dredging of the Banana River. The clearing bids were due on November 29 while the dredging job proposals were due on December 20. This announcement was a clear sign that the U.S. Navy was ready to move on the establishment of a patrol base in Brevard County.

Harvey & Quinn of Pensacola won the clearing bid and the first work at the base officially began on December 18. The clearing job was to be completed quickly as another bid was announced for the clearing of an additional 460 acres. But Harvey & Quinn ran into some problems: “So impenetrable was this growth that the job was not completed until 29 April 1940 and the contractor lost heavily on the job.”⁴⁶ The winner of the \$400,000 dredging contract, the Atlantic, Gulf and Pacific Dredging Company of New York, fared much better. They began work in January 1940 and completed the excavation of 3,600,000 yards of material within the 180 days allowed in the contract.⁴⁷

With all of the development work under way or already completed, the contracts for the construction of a hangar, bulkheads, pier, seaplane ramp, parking areas, barracks,

and other administrative and operational buildings were still to be issued. A call went out to the people of Brevard; “we need laborers!” All workers who wanted to work at the base were required to register at city hall in December 1939. Those who registered were required to list their “names, the addresses at which they may be located, two references, and their occupation.”⁴⁸ The wages to be paid at the base were those set for each occupation by the United States Department of Labor and each worker was to wait until called by the Navy to work at the base. County Commissioners later urged that all contractors look first to the local labor force “to promote the best interest and welfare of Brevard County by their employment.”⁴⁹

Work on the seawall, ramps, and hangar apron began in late February but there was still the issue of access to the base. The requested road and bridge improvements from the State had not materialized and the need for better transportation routes was essential to the continuation of the projects at Banana River. In March 1940, an agreement was finally reached between the State Road Department and the Public Roads Administration to split the cost of building a road that would connect the Banana River base to the main highway system. Plans were also made to improve the main road system leading from Cocoa to Cocoa Beach. The final appropriations from the state were \$650,000, which included money for hard surfacing the roads from Cocoa Beach south to the base and from Eau Gallie Beach north and building a causeway over the Banana River.⁵⁰

Construction continued at a hurried pace through April. Temporary bachelor officer barracks for 50 men, enlisted barracks for 160 men, the dispensary, and a storehouse were begun on April 1 and work began on the first hangar in mid-April. Just as the construction was hitting full stride, the people of Brevard found another reason to celebrate when Senator Charles Andrews announced in late May that the Senate Naval Affairs Committee had approved an additional \$4,500,000 for the expansion of the base. The elation did not last long because by July it was announced that although the funds were approved, the Senate Appropriations Committee had not released the money. Despite the disappointment, residents were hearing good news. By August it was announced that the sewage and water systems were nearing completion and the base

would be ready for sailors in October. A formal commissioning ceremony was scheduled for October 1, 1940.

The first sailors and the commander officer of the base arrived in Cocoa shortly before the commissioning. Lieutenant Commander Waldo Tullsen arrived from San Diego Naval Station in late September followed by Lieutenant Commander F.D. Gardner, a medical officer. They were joined by 29 enlisted men. One of those men was Hal Gettings from Missouri. Gettings had volunteered for the Navy earlier in 1940 and was sent to Pensacola shortly after boot camp. He was soon given orders to head to Banana River to help commission a new naval air station. Gettings had never heard of Cocoa much less Banana River and, apparently, neither had the Navy: “Actually the Navy didn’t know where the Banana River was. They put us on a train and sent us to Miami and we spent a week or so down there while the Navy tried to locate the base.”⁵¹ Gettings finally arrived in Cocoa where he and his crewmates were loaded onto a bus and sent to the station. They soon found out why the higher-ranking crew members were staying in Cocoa hotels: “we didn’t even have bunks out there. There was mattresses which we laid down on the floor...It wasn’t very well organized.”⁵²

The unorganized state of the base was soon corrected as the construction site officially became Naval Air Station Banana River at the commissioning ceremonies on October 1, 1940, two weeks prior to the commissioning of NAS Jacksonville. The Greater Cocoa Chamber of Commerce arranged the ceremonies with help from the Kiwanis Club, the Rotary Club, and the American Legion Post. The commissioning ceremony was simple but the local residents turned out in droves. Lt. Commander Tullsen read aloud the orders for the base and raised the flag with the help of local Boy Scouts and Legionaries. Despite the road improvements, many visitors got stuck in the sand and required the services of the newly commissioned crew.

By October 1940, Brevard County had welcomed its first Navy personnel. A full-page ad in *The Cocoa Tribune* greeted the officers and men of the Banana River Naval Air Station on October 3, 1940 and invited them to spend their leisure time in Cocoa. Although the first group of men only numbered 31, the citizens of the surrounding towns were ready to feel their economic impact. The base had already improved the economic

situation of the county with increased employment and economic activity. The people of Brevard County, however, had no idea what would follow.

CHAPTER TWO: NAS BANANA RIVER IN THE WAR YEARS

The early years at Naval Air Station Banana River were relatively quiet, as the United States remained a neutral player in an increasingly belligerent world. The personnel at the base and the citizens of Brevard watched as Europe went to war but they and the rest of the United States were soon drawn into the international conflict on December 7, 1941, when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. America was at war and the mission of NAS Banana River shifted. The military installation created by the Hepburn Board in 1939 was no longer a simple defensive post on the coast of Florida but a fully functional training and observation facility that would grow and provide many services for not only the military machine of the United States, but also for the soldiers who served there and the citizens of the surrounding communities.

Prior to the outbreak of war, however, the residents of Brevard County were focusing their attention on securing a small, outlying naval base at Banana River. The global situation, meanwhile, had grown increasingly dangerous. Germany's Adolf Hitler ignored his own promise that the Sudetenland would be his last conquest and invaded Czechoslovakia in March 1939. Hitler further shocked the world as he allied himself with Russia's Joseph Stalin and shortly afterwards invaded Poland in September 1939. France and Great Britain, realizing that military action was the only way to halt Hitler's desire for more territory, declared war on Germany. Despite the declarations of war, Europe remained relatively quiet following the fall of Poland only three weeks after the initial invasion. The silence of the guns, however, did not indicate inaction. Britain and France were making attempts to bolster their weak military systems and prepare for the inevitable war while Germany was planning for the ultimate takeover of the European continent. The "phony war" was shattered in May 1940. Germany's military might stormed into France and eventually crushed the French and British armies and forced France to sign a humiliating surrender in late June 1940. Britain also endured the humiliation of defeat, despite the harrowing escape of more than 300,000 from the beaches of Dunkirk, and spent the rest of 1940 under the threat of a German invasion.

None of this was going unnoticed in the United States. President Franklin D. Roosevelt was in contact with European leaders, especially British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Although President Roosevelt and much of the American public were appalled at the events in Europe, the prevailing opinion was still against getting involved in any conflict. The United States continued to proclaim its neutrality while shoring up its own defenses. Despite American neutrality, President Roosevelt managed to help the embattled British by swapping fifty World War I era destroyers for control of eight British bases. By the time Naval Air Station Banana River was commissioned in October 1940, the United States was walking the fine line of quasi-neutrality.

Despite the rolling thunder of war in Europe, the people of Brevard County were rejoicing in their recent luck. The hard work of county leaders had paid off and hundreds of thousands of dollars had been spent building a naval air station at Banana River. The nearby cities welcomed the thirty-one sailors to the base and invited them into their homes and businesses. More good news came shortly after the commissioning when word came from Representative Joe Hendricks that the base was being upgraded: “Since the training of flyers by the Navy has been expanded, the Jacksonville base will be used principally for training purposes, and the Banana River Base is now to be a main operating base.”⁵³ Banana River was no longer simply an outlying base for Naval Air Station Jacksonville but its future was still uncertain. Many hoped that the increase in status would bring more money to the project, but little changed in the first few months after the commissioning. Construction continued on the base and the thirty men assigned there were kept busy, mostly with paperwork.

Hal Gettings, a navy recruit assigned to Naval Air Station Banana River, understood the mission of the base in the first few months but also witnessed some of the complications of getting a military installation up and running:

Our job was to get things started for later operations. A lot of paperwork getting things started. The yeomen wrote to the Navy Department for some forms to get things started. Their reply was that had to be submitted on form so-and-so, which, of course, we didn't have either. There was a lot of red tape and confusion.⁵⁴

Despite the complications, work continued to make NAS Banana River an operating installation. Although additional civil service job openings were announced in

November, the construction program slowed and most of the work being done at the base was administrative.

By 1941, however, the activities at the base began to seem routine. There were still no planes assigned to Banana River and there had been no recent mention of the anticipated additional funding for the base. Some community members began to complain that the full \$1.8 million appropriated for NAS Banana River had not been spent. Rumors began to subside as Senator Claude Pepper announced that 1,000 men were to be stationed at NAS Banana River in the near future. The level of excitement increased in February 1941 when President Roosevelt asked Congress to appropriate \$18,425,500 to expand Florida's naval installations. NAS Banana River was slated to receive \$1,425,000 of the appropriation and the money was to be used to build "additional buildings for housing married officers and enlisted men and their families, hangars, recreational facilities, etc."⁵⁵ The money and the projects indicated an increased function and helped to confirm the issue of additional personnel for NAS Banana River. Congress approved President Roosevelt's request and construction resumed in April 1941. Final appropriations were earmarked for the construction of barracks and a mess hall for 650 men, an extension of the bachelor officer's quarters, housing for married enlisted men, recreational facilities, hospital facilities, ammunition storage facilities, and the extension of roads and walkways.⁵⁶

NAS Banana River welcomed its first plane in the spring of 1941. A Grumman J2F "Duck" was sent to the base and turned over to Commander Waldo Tullsen. The relatively small seaplanes were first used by the Navy in 1937 and were primarily utilized for anti-submarine maneuvers. Commander Tullsen was the only pilot on the naval air station and the "Duck" was employed primarily for inspection tours and not for anti-submarine operations. The plane, however, did fly more than just inspection missions. As a yeoman in the captain's office, Hal Gettings was often given the opportunity to ride with Commander Tullsen on his occasional trips to NAS Jacksonville. Commander Tullsen was known to fly only fifty feet above the ground to scare the cattle. On one trip, Tullsen stopped in St. Augustine to see Marineland and "another time he decided coming back from Jacksonville that we needed a Coke, so we landed in Mosquito Lagoon. There was a little fishing camp there and we tied up at the dock and had a Coke."⁵⁷

The summer of 1941 brought even more advancements at NAS Banana River. In June, Commander Tullsen announced that local labor would be needed and that the contractors making improvements to the base would require several hundred men. More good news arrived in early July when it was announced that President Roosevelt “authorized the construction of fifty houses at Banana River Air Base for families of enlisted personnel...increase in personnel at Banana River Station responsible for need.”⁵⁸ An additional \$280,000 appropriation primarily for the construction of barracks to house an additional 600 men was announced in mid-July.

Although a great deal of money was being poured into NAS Banana River, the station continued to operate with only one plane. A decision made in July, however, would change not only the number of aircraft at the station but help to establish the mission of NAS Banana River. The Commander, Naval Air Force, Atlantic Fleet (ComAirLant) determined that the seaplane training area at Norfolk was “too crowded for primary instruction in PBM flying and...decided to send six training planes to Banana River.”⁵⁹ The PBM Mariner seaplane was manufactured by the Martin Company and had already played an important role in the neutrality patrols before the detachment was sent to Banana River.⁶⁰ The PBM carried a crew of six or seven and was considered an observation aircraft, a bomber, and a search and rescue plane. The initial function of the six PBMs stationed at NAS Banana River was training.

The Transitional Training Squadron Atlantic (TTSA) was conducting all flight training at the station. The TTSA’s mission was to get a squadron of green pilots up in the planes and give them flying time while training them in the plane’s systems, tactics, and instruments. After this basic training, the pilots would move on to more advanced training at other sites. The TTSA was based in Norfolk and once the ComAirLant transferred the six PBMs to Banana River, TTSA instructors and a squadron accompanied the planes. The first three PBMs flew in on August 11 and 12. *The Melbourne Times* reported that the planes arrived with nine officers and sixty enlisted men and were already at work: “the planes have been on familiarization trips daily throughout this section as well as one night flight Tuesday evening.”⁶¹ Within a few months of the first planes reaching Banana River, the “detachment had six planes and 14 officers and a thin trickle of PBM pilots began to emerge as Banana River graduates.”⁶²

The pace at NAS Banana River increased with the addition of the training program. Practice bombing ranges were set up north of the base on Cape Canaveral and bombing runs began in October. Concerned that an interested public would attempt to watch the training, the base issued public statements warning the people of Brevard to stay away from the area. The training kept many of the men busy and provided for some excitement and entertainment. A pilot from Miami had his own adventure when he “discovered one of his section had trouble with his landing gear, landed at the Naval Air Station Banana River, bogged down in the sand, bending his propeller.”⁶³ The success of the initial training encouraged the local officials who continued to discover that the government had plans to continue expanding the base. Word came in November that an additional \$560,000 was approved to build 160 housing units.

The mood in Brevard County was optimistic at the end of 1941. Economic conditions were improving in the county and NAS Banana River, the pride of county leaders, was growing. The people of Brevard received a jolt on December 7, 1941. Word quickly spread that Japan had bombed Pearl Harbor as people were enjoying a quiet Sunday afternoon. Brevard County residents immediately understood that their lives had changed; America was at war.

The War Diary entry for NAS Banana River on December 7, 1941, read: “1500 Posted extra sentries on notification that a state of war existed with Japan.”⁶⁴ The sailors assigned to NAS Banana River were immediately ordered to the base and groups were sent out to the nearby towns to collect anyone who had not heard the devastating news. The base was closed to the public and many local vendors were forbidden to maintain their businesses on the station. Susie Davis had moved to Brevard County in 1938 and her husband had worked on the crew that dredged the Banana River to create the station. The two were given permission to open a small restaurant on base that served a quick lunch to the sailors and construction crews at the station. The Shack, as the restaurant was known, was a popular spot on base but things changed after Pearl Harbor: “We were out there until December 7 1941, we had to move out, we took the lumber that was in the Shack brought it to Pineda Street and built us a 2 bedroom cottage.”⁶⁵

Rumors were running rampant at the base following the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Talk of an invasion from the sea put many on edge and even caused the recall of all base

personnel and a subsequent blackout on December 12. The water in practice bombs was replaced with oil and gasoline in an unsuccessful attempt to build a usable bomb for the PBMs. The failure of the homemade bombs led to the request for real bombs to protect the coastline. By December 16, all planes had been outfitted with appropriate bombs. The extra activity at the base led to a request for fifty local men to help guard the base. Preference was given to veterans and the uniformed civilian guard's mission was to "release sailors who are needed for other duties at the base."⁶⁶

By January 1942, the regular TTSA training regimen was replaced with routine coastal patrols. In early February, word came that a scouting squadron was being established at NAS Banana River. Personnel for the new squadron, VS-1D7, began arriving in mid-February but the TTSA continued to maintain the patrols until the new squadron could become fully functional.⁶⁷ The coastal patrols, however, were soon transformed into anti-submarine patrols.

Since America's entry into the war, the threat of German U-boat attacks along the Atlantic coast had increased. Germany had declared war on the United States following the American declaration of war on its ally, Japan. The German U-boats had haunted the Atlantic shipping lanes since 1939, but had remained far from the American coast. By late January, sightings of German U-boats off the Atlantic shoreline were becoming common. Florida was a particularly popular hunting ground for U-boat captains. From the Bahamas to Cape Canaveral, the shipping lane "narrows to a vulnerable bottle neck, made even narrower by [the] Gulf Stream."⁶⁸ Brevard County presented an especially appealing place to pick off freighters full of supplies. The U-boats could wait a few miles offshore and the vessels would simply sail into range making the waters near NAS Banana River "an ideal situation for the submarine commanders who could sight their targets easily against the shoreline."⁶⁹ The first German U-boat attack along the Florida coast came on the afternoon of February 19, 1942. The *Pan Massachusetts* was torpedoed twenty miles offshore and within sight of the Brevard beaches. NAS Banana River participated in the search and rescue attempts but the TTSA detachment was not able to locate the U-boat that sunk the ship.

In the week that followed, three more vessels were torpedoed and destroyed off the Brevard coast and even more were sunk at other points south. Although the planes at

Banana River were conducting anti-submarine patrols, there was little they could do to destroy a U-boat. The PBM was a slow plane and the men flying them had not been trained in hunting submarines. Although they were not destroying enemy U-boats, NAS Banana River planes and their crews were kept busy throughout the initial U-boat attacks and those that followed throughout 1942.

The most important functions of the seaplanes assigned to the base were that of patrol and especially search and rescue. Crews on patrol often assisted faster planes and ships in locating submarines or dropping flares to guide other craft to points of potential action. Although countless patrols were made throughout the war, submarines were rarely discovered. The most critical role that NAS Banana River played in the Battle of the Atlantic was search and rescue. U-boats consistently attacked Allied vessels off the Florida coast in the spring and early summer months of 1942. The base's War Diary contains numerous references to search and rescue attempts, especially in April and May.

On May 2 alone, three major search and rescue missions were undertaken by base crews. The day began with a surprise search and rescue operation in the early morning hours. An ensign on patrol landed his plane near a life raft and discovered an injured man aboard. The plane's radioman "took off his clothes, dove overboard, swam to [the] raft, brought [the] man to [the] plane, where an improvised splint was made by using floating lumber, hoisted him into [the] rear seat of the plane, and then swam back to the raft to await being picked up by another plane."⁷⁰ The station was kept busy with the dramatic rescue of sixteen seamen after eleven days at sea. An ensign from NAS Banana River spotted a lifeboat about seventy miles offshore and landed his plane near the boat. He discovered that the men in the lifeboat had been aboard a British ship that had been torpedoed about 1,460 miles out and had "existed on chocolate, sea biscuits, condensed milk, and water."⁷¹ A final, and much larger, search and rescue operation on that day involved two steamships hit about 12 miles off Cape Canaveral. NAS Banana River sent crews to the scene and "Ninety survivors were brought to this station and cared for."⁷²

The base remained busy with anti-submarine patrols but the pressure on the TTSA and its PBMs was alleviated with the arrival of five OS2U Kingfisher seaplanes on March 11, 1942.⁷³ The scouting squadron that had been authorized in February, VS-1D7, was finally commissioned the following day with nine pilots, forty-three men, and

the five seaplanes. The OS2U was not any faster than the PBM but was easily able to patrol the seas around the base and escort merchant ships through the shipping lanes. The additional patrol planes and crews did allow the TTSA to resurrect their training program on a limited scale.

On April 9, even more help arrived when a contingent of fifty Coastguardsmen joined VS-1D7 with three OS2U seaplanes. While operating from the base, they were quartered at NAS Banana River for only a few months until permanent housing was made available in Eau Gallie. The group aided in the convoy and patrol missions and was also assigned to watch and guard the beaches. The threat of invasion motivated NAS Banana River and the local communities to set up beach defenses shortly after Pearl Harbor. The U-boat attacks increased the defensive activities along the beach: “important buildings, gun emplacements and ammunition dumps were ringed with sandbags. Two three inch landing cannons, obsolete even in the last war, were wheeled down to the beach.”⁷⁴ The frenzied pace of patrol duty required all available personnel at the base so the arrival of the Coast Guard to patrol the beaches alleviated many people’s fear of a beach invasion. With the additional planes and crews assigned to the base, the patrol and escort duty at NAS Banana River was operating on a twenty-four hour basis by May.

NAS Banana River became home to another unique group in April 1942. On April 1, Project Baker was moved from NAS San Diego, California, and arrived at Banana River on April 3. Project Baker was a confidential program that developed and tested instrument landing equipment. The program was conceived in 1933 but officially became Project Baker in 1940 following logistical problems that accompanied being attached to an unrelated squadron. Project Baker was moved to NAS Banana River in 1942 because the fleet activity at NAS San Diego was so intense that their planes and personnel were being utilized for patrol missions. The move was originally intended to be temporary but the conditions at Banana River were ideal for Project Baker so the transfer was made permanent. Project Baker arrived with one plane, a PBY Catalina, an Officer in Charge, and nine enlisted crewmembers.⁷⁵ The program grew in size over the years and eventually required its own building both for security and personnel and equipment needs. Project Baker’s experiments and development of new technology flourished so that by 1944 its mission was expanded to include radio landing experiments

and was officially declared, “Testing in the experimental and developmental stage, electronic airborne and related ground equipment utilized by naval aircraft for navigation, instrument low approach, radio communications and certain forms of television and counter-measure apparatus.”⁷⁶

The remainder of 1942 saw continued expansion of the base and changes in leadership. In June, NAS Banana River’s original Commanding Officer, Commander Waldo Tullsen, left for a new assignment on the staff of the Commandant of the Seventh Naval District. He was succeeded by Commander Adolphus W. Gorton on June 2. Commander Gorton was welcomed to the community in a luncheon sponsored by the Cocoa Rotary Club, the Kiwanis Club and the Chamber of Commerce. During a speech given at the luncheon, Commander Gorton expressed surprise at the recent growth at the base and “told them that the station is now a combination training and operation base for the Navy...the station would be expanded rapidly.”⁷⁷

A great deal of money had been appropriated since December 7, 1941. In February 1942, news came that NAS Banana River was to receive \$2,250,000 for improvements to the base. The money was going to projects such as an administration building, a land plane hanger, additional storage facilities, shooting ranges, and the extension of living quarters.⁷⁸ True to Commander Gorton’s promise, another \$940,000 was approved by Secretary of the Navy, Frank Knox, in July 1942 for additional seaplane facilities and living quarters. The expansion of personnel on base continued as well when the 124th Signal Radio Intelligence Company “consisting of 137 men and 7 officers, with complete equipment, reported to this station for duty” on July 13, 1942.⁷⁹ In the fall of 1942 ComAirLant approved the training of entire PBM squadrons together. The first group, VPB 201, was commissioned and ordered to begin instruction at NAS Banana River.⁸⁰

NAS Banana River was barely able to handle its rapid growth in 1942. The war had radically altered the station’s initial purpose as a small outlying base to a major training and patrol installation. Many of the groups assigned to the base were sharing facilities. The shared buildings, runways, gas supplies, and the like were stretched to their limit. The Navy continued to add new buildings to the base to alleviate some of the cramped conditions and accommodate the new squadrons and units they continued to

transfer to the base. With an increase in size came an upsurge in appropriations and prestige for the base. According to Commander Gorton, however, the Navy had been recklessly unprepared for the rapid growth of NAS Banana River:

In an effort to be conservative and save the Navy money by building only for immediate needs we actually cost the Navy a fortune in alterations and expansions. There is hardly a building on the station that has not been enlarged, sometimes at great expense as compared to the small increase in the original appropriation had eventual expansion had been considered.⁸¹

Despite the problems caused by the hurried development of NAS Banana River in 1942, the need for expansion continued into 1943.

NAS Banana River welcomed the New Year with new construction and personnel. The need for a landplane field increased as the station expanded and in April 1942 money was appropriated to construct a hanger and runways suitable for landplanes. The field was finally operational in January 1943 and was initially used almost exclusively by Project Baker. The introduction of landplane facilities made NAS Banana River an even more attractive site for training since the base was no longer limited to seaplane access. The growth continued throughout the spring when Congressman Hendricks announced that an additional \$1,180,000 was allocated for further expansion of the facilities at Banana River Naval Air Station.⁸² The new funding allowed the station to quadruple the size of the assembly and repair shop, construct another training building and gymnasium, and to build another seaplane hanger and accompanying ramp.

In addition to the physical changes at the base, a unique personnel change also occurred in January 1943. Since the outbreak of war, uniformed civilians hired by the base had guarded the station. In January 1943, a detachment of United States Marines arrived to assume control of station security. The civilian guards were kept on to augment the Marine detachment. The fifty-five Marines were under the command of Captain Clyde Brandon and their military presence at the station gates was felt immediately. New measures were put into place to prevent sabotage and perimeter security breeches. The Marines also joined with the Coast Guard to solidify the station's beach defenses by adding more observation posts and establishing additional recognition systems. The joint plan was seen as an important aspect of station security: "The increase of beach and ocean observation by the Coast Guard Patrol and the Marine Detachment

assures better observation between the main and south gates, a distance of about three miles.”⁸³ Securing the beaches was a priority because the threat of invasion remained a major concern for authorities at the station. As late as July 1943 reports of possible U-boat operations and the landing of enemy saboteurs were received at the station.

Other organizational changes came in May 1943. Secretary of War, Henry Stimson, established the Air Operational Training Command (AOTC) in April of the same year to consolidate and strengthen the training regimen of naval air personnel. NAS Banana River was assigned to AOTC in May. The TTSA was initially excluded from the new command structure because it was connected to fleet operations. The TTSA detachment assigned to NAS Banana River doubled in size throughout the summer. By July 1943, thirty planes and their crews were stationed at Banana River. The training regimen changed with the increase in personnel and machinery. Instead of training each crew as a separate entity, the decision was made to instruct the crews as units to improve their effectiveness and support capabilities. As the entire base had earlier in the year, the TTSA was brought under the authority of the AOTC and TTSA became an Operational Training Unit in November 1943. These changes, however, did not alter the day to day operations of the unit and training continued as normal.

The last few months of 1943 saw a drastic increase in activity at NAS Banana River. In September two new units arrived at the station. The first of these brought an international flavor to the training program. On September 6, a force of men from the Free French Naval Air Force arrived to train under the TTSA. Often referred to as the Fighting French Naval Air Force, they were members of the Free French Naval Force called to duty by General Charles de Gaulle following the fall of France in 1940. A handful of members were sent to the United States to train with the hope that they could later assist in the liberation of their country. A second group of the Fighting French arrived later in the month and the entire detachment trained together under the TTSA.

The second group arrived on September 4 and was known as the Air Bomber Training Unit (ABTU). The mission of the ABTU was to train bombardiers at high altitudes on the Norden Bomb sight. Assigned to Jacksonville in January, the unit moved to NAS Banana River because of its isolation and the large number of available target

ranges in the area. The group brought with it 19 planes, mostly Beechcraft SNBs, and began training almost immediately.

Bombing runs were conducted over both the water and land. Water targets were at various points in the Banana River, Sykes Creek, in the Atlantic Ocean, and later in Lake Okeechobee. The most used land targets were in Holopaw and near the Cape Canaveral lighthouse. Targets were usually large buoys or land markers. The land marker in Holopaw was created by a local farmer who placed lanterns in a fifty foot circle. Occasionally an armored boat out of New Smyrna Beach would serve as a moving, water target. Charles Bartberger, a pilot in the ABTU, knew when they were flying with a good bombardier:

Now we were in radio contact with that boat, and that boat had specific instructions to go out and just go in a circle...we'd try and drop bombs on that boat. It was our estimation that when we got a good bombardier that he started getting close to that boat, he'd tighten up on those circles so they were smaller and fast so we wouldn't hit him, because I imagine it made quite a noise.⁸⁴

According to Bartberger, ABTU training was intense with pilots and their crews often flying at least two or three training runs a day. The drone of the daily routine, however, was occasionally broken. On one bombing run over the Cape Canaveral lighthouse, a pilot instructor, weary from the time spent dating a nurse at the station, fell asleep: "And then he heard bombs away and he looked out and there was the lighthouse down below instead of a land target. The next day the captain from the Coast Guard was up at Banana River Naval Air Station wanted to know who had dropped bombs on the lighthouse."⁸⁵ On another occasion, weather had forced several crews to land at an auxiliary field in Titusville. While waiting for the clouds to clear, a married instructor left his plane and took his crew to a local farm to buy a rabbit to give to his child for Easter. When they returned to the plane, the Norden Bomb sight's secret piece of equipment was missing. According to Bartberger, the education commander had landed at the field to check on the plane crews: "He landed, and while we were over there negotiating for a bunny rabbit, he got in that airplane and took the Norton Bomb Site and went back to base...I don't know what the reprimand was for that."⁸⁶

ABTU crews trained at NAS Banana River throughout the war. ABTU instruction remained the same throughout the war with the exception of the aircraft. By 1944, the

training regimen was altered when the ABTU began using the PBY Catalina instead of the Beechcraft SNB. The change was made to make the training more efficient. While the SNB was reliable, it could only hold one student at a time. The PBY was a larger plane and could hold up to eight trainees and could make longer bombing runs. The increased space and time in the air meant that more students could practice their skills on each flight. Most graduates of the ABTU at NAS Banana River were assigned to crews in the Pacific Theater.

The following month, a Blimp squadron was given orders to moor at NAS Banana River. A mooring station was built earlier in the year to provide an emergency landing spot for the lighter-than-air craft. The blimps, permanently stationed at Richmond Naval Air Station, served as submarine patrol craft all along the eastern seaboard and had made several emergency stops at NAS Banana River. The assignment of the blimp detachment to the station “resulted in regular overnight stops of a single blimp...the detachment occupied a specially built barracks and a storehouse at the south end of the landing field.”⁸⁷

The high level of activity continued through the final months of 1943. A detachment of United States Coast Guard BM crews arrived at NAS Banana River in December to assist the search and rescue units. In the same month, the station became a supply point for other nearby stations including Daytona, Vero Beach, and Melbourne. In addition, F6F Hellcats fighter planes stationed at NAS Melbourne began flying out of NAS Banana River on their gunnery practice runs. The flurry of activity continued on into 1944.

The New Year dawned with a renewed sense of hope for the United States. The American military machine was in full force and American soldiers were fighting in all the major theaters of the war. The excitement of progress extended to NAS Banana River. The station continued to grow in personnel and purpose. The first addition of 1944 came in January. The first female military personnel arrived on January 17. The two women were WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service). The WAVES program had been created by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in July 1942 to recruit women into the Navy to fill positions held by sailors needed for combat duty. By

1944, women were serving in shore establishments throughout the continental states and also Hawaii and Alaska.

NAS Banana River had requested a group of WAVES to help in the supply office, the radio crew, as well as serve in other positions throughout the base when needed. The lack of housing slowed the transfer of the requested 126 WAVES and when the first two officers arrived on base in January, they had to live off base until their barracks were completed in February.⁸⁸ The first enlisted WAVES arrived in February and more continued to arrive through the spring as the WAVES enlisted quarters were complete. For many of the men at the station, the arrival of the WAVES was fairly routine. Women had been at the station serving as office staff and the WAVES were accepted and welcomed on the base. For Hal Gettings it was a matter of necessity: "I don't recall it causing any problems. We were pretty desperate for manpower so we needed the women power."⁸⁹

As the WAVES were settling in, another new unit was set up at NAS Banana River. On April 1 an Advanced Navigation Training Unit was established to train officers in long-range navigation (LORAN) "to supply the needs of the rapidly growing Naval Air Transport Service for full time navigators." The LORAN unit was developed at NAS Banana River by the Navigation Department and transferred from a navigation school in Hollywood, Florida, to be combined with the existing programs. The unit remained at the station only through October, but trained numerous NAS Banana River students in LORAN.⁹⁰

Each of the programs at NAS Banana River expanded during 1944. The personnel and programs were forced to compete for building space, parking space, and more importantly, runway space. An increase in the numbers of the F6F planes from NAS Melbourne that used the station for rearming and refueling while on their gunnery runs made the complicated space issues even more problematic. To ease these space issues, the station was able to secure funding in the summer of 1944 to build additional facilities. Parking and service buildings were erected especially for the F6F training.

Although the war raged in both the European and Pacific theatres, the feeling throughout the county was upbeat and anxious for the impending victory. Activity remained constant throughout the remainder of 1944 and into 1945. The number of

people stationed at NAS Banana River increased from 548 officers and 4,223 men at the beginning of 1944 to 730 officers and 5,237 men on March 30, 1945. The activity was also reflected in the number of aircraft at the station. Between November 1944 and April 1945 the number of aircraft jumped from 164 to 176. Even new construction continued through the end of the war; \$1,213,158 was spent on construction projects in third quarter of 1945.⁹¹ A new Air-Sea rescue group was established in March 1945 but all other units and detachments operated as usual.

As 1945 continued, the mood on the base lightened as the war in Europe drew to its conclusion in May 1945. The mood on base was exultant: "Of course, everybody was jubilant and happy and jumping up and down. A bunch of them went and got drunk."⁹² Of course not everyone was as excited. According to Thomas Eason, NAS Banana River's celebration was tempered because most of the men trained there were expecting to be sent to the Pacific Theatre: "VE Day passed here pretty much unnoticed...the Navy was in the Pacific anyway throughout the war, where the Army was interested in Europe."⁹³ Others expressed the concern of the local merchants: "We drove through the town honking the horn...I think many of the merchants thought, oh boy, the war's over and all these people are going to go home and take all their money with them...We were disappointed they weren't having a big time."⁹⁴ Like many in the armed forces, the sailors at NAS Banana River were reluctant to celebrate until the war in the Pacific was over.

When the Japanese surrendered in August 1945, the mood at the station was very different. People ran out of buildings on the station and began to celebrate. Spontaneous parties sprang up around the station: "The place exploded. We had a party at our place...all the guys from his [Thomas Eason] watch in...all the Lieutenants...everybody came."⁹⁵ Some of the festivities, however, got a little out of hand: "On that day, the airplanes came flying under the wires...those guys were probably half-smashed, but it was very celebratory, it really was."⁹⁶ But once the excitement died down the reality of the surrender set in: "it was the end of a very tough period for the country. Until the atomic bomb, it was fully expected that the war would go on another four or five years. When it came time for you to be back to work, you went."⁹⁷

With the end of the war there were many questions about the future of the station. Several of the units were decommissioned following VE Day and even more following VJ Day. The last combat training class graduated in August 1945 as the war's conclusion was all but determined. It was decided to continue to operate the station despite losing several training units. Many of the men were notified that they were to remain on board. The sailors at NAS Banana River did, however, receive orders that the station was to become home to German Prisoners of War in August 1945. A small group of POWs was transferred to NAS Banana River from Camp Blanding in Starke, Florida. About 20 military and civilian supervisors guarded the 148 Germans at the station. They were initially housed on the naval base but were soon relocated so as to position them farther from the station's general population.

The POWs daily routine was simple. Most of their time was spent on some type of work detail. The type of work the POWs did ranged from clean-up duty to building base structures like the swimming pool. The German POWs also spent some of their time participating in the reeducation program sponsored by the American government. The purpose of the program was to provide the POWs with information that would convince them that Hitler and Nazism were wrong and to encourage them to reject totalitarianism and promote democracy upon their return to Germany. Not all of the POWs at NAS Banana River took the program seriously as reported by a State Department official on a visit to the station in November 1945:

Although I discovered no indications of anything being amiss in this direction, the Base Camp is suspicious of the prisoners here since Lieutenant Olin [Banana River executive officer] discovered that the education program was being slyly sabotaged by the three best teachers. The discovery was made as the result of an investigation after he found a picture of Hitler (painted by one of the teachers from Red Cross materials) hidden inside a double blackboard in the messhall.⁹⁸

The POWs presence on the base was not felt by many of the sailors. Due to their separation, few men had contact with the POWs. According to Thomas Eason, "I used to see them marching to the Chow Hall from wherever they were, I guess working different shifts like I did, I didn't see many of them."⁹⁹ NAS Banana River ceased to serve as a POW camp by the end of 1946 as the Germans were sent home.

Following the end of the war, the mission of NAS Banana River changed and the training programs gradually ended. The search and rescue units remained at the station and continued to stay busy throughout 1945. In early December, one of the most mysterious search and rescue missions took place. On December 5, 1945 five TBM Avenger Torpedo Bombers with fourteen men aboard left NAS Ft. Lauderdale on a navigational training flight. The planes were to fly over the Gulf Stream to the Bahamas and back. An hour into the mission, the radio center at NAS Ft. Lauderdale received a distress call. The group reported that their compasses were not working and they were unsure of their position. The communication between the planes and NAS Ft. Lauderdale broke down without determining the location of the bombers. A PBM Mariner from NAS Banana River was dispatched with its 13 member search and rescue crew. Thomas Eason was on duty at the radio shack and had the job of maintaining contact with the PBM crew. He recalls the series of transmissions with the PBM after it left the station:

The airplane called in; I'm ready to go so I responded, "Roger, go ahead." They were instructed to call back in every 30 minutes...It came 8:00 p.m. and the airplane was supposed to call and it didn't call. 8:05 p.m...At 8:05 we started calling every two minutes, until 8:15 p.m. at which time I called the watch commander and told him this airplane didn't respond and said keep working on it...I kept working on it, then it came about 8:30 p.m. and I said to the chief I said you better notify somebody.¹⁰⁰

Eason and his superiors continued their attempts to contact the PBM crew for the next several hours. Both flights had disappeared into thin air and despite an extensive search for both crews, nothing was ever found. The story of the lost aircraft and their crews is commonly tied to the myth of the Bermuda Triangle.

Despite the initial post-war activity, NAS Banana River began to downsize through 1946. Although it remained a major search and rescue center, many of the training programs were either dissolved or transferred to other stations to be consolidated and scaled back to appropriate post-war size. Thousands of men were stationed at the base during the Second World War. Their mission was to become effective members of the American military. While the sailors were performing their duty at NAS Banana River, they were treated to all the advantages and shortcomings that Brevard County had to offer.

CHAPTER THREE: LIVING LIFE IN BREVARD COUNTY DURING WORLD WAR II

Lives, communities, the country changed drastically between America's dramatic entrance into the World War II in 1941 and the establishment of peace in 1945. In Brevard County, Florida, the war years changed much more than the physical landscape of a small strip of land between the Atlantic Ocean and the Banana River. That piece of property, which was once stood desolate and virtually inhospitable to all save sand crabs scurrying along the beach and sea turtles laying their eggs, had become home to thousands of sailors and an important piece of the machinery that drove the American war effort. Beginning in 1939, Naval Air Station Banana River provided the United States military with trained navigators, pilots, radiomen, and bombardiers, but most importantly, with men willing to serve their country in its time of need. The investment made by the Brevard County community in the late 1930s had paid off.

NAS Banana River bustled with activity throughout the war and as more sailors reported for duty, the more the mission of the station changed and matured. While the days were full of training schedules, duty rosters, and job requirements, the sailors managed to find time for a little fun. The desire for some rest and relaxation was often satisfied in the towns throughout Brevard County. In many ways, the war not only altered the lives of those stationed at the base but also the lives of those living in the communities nearby. As they had banded together to convince the Navy that Brevard County was an ideal site for a naval air station in 1938 and 1939, the residents of towns such as Melbourne, Eau Gallie, Cocoa, and Titusville once again linked their resources. This time they were dedicated to supporting the sailors living at the station that they had so diligently fought for before the outbreak of World War II. Ultimately, both the personnel at NAS Banana River and the citizens of Brevard County came to be forever altered by their experiences during World War II.

While considered a paradise by its residents and land speculators, Brevard County was not what most sailors were expecting when they received orders to report to

NAS Banana River. The first group of sailors began arriving in September 1940. Most had never heard of Cocoa, Florida, and they were not impressed with what they saw upon their arrival. Dan Ballentine, one of the original crew members, attempted to see the sights in Cocoa upon his arrival: “At first we thought we were on the outskirts of town as we walked from the Knox Hotel down the main street...then suddenly we were in front of the post office and it was all darkness beyond. So it was that we saw Cocoa for the first time.”¹⁰¹ First impressions of Cocoa did not change drastically as more soldiers were introduced to Brevard County. Thomas Eason arrived in late 1944 and was not sure where he was going: “I had never heard of Cocoa, because where I came from when you told anyone you were from Florida, the first thing they said was, “Miami?” Getting off the train at a small little railroad station in Cocoa was not very exciting. It was kind of distressing really, wondering where am I.”¹⁰²

While the first impressions of Cocoa were less than favorable, the initial shock of the trip to the NAS Banana River and then the sights upon arriving at the base produced an equal depression. Most sailors were transported from the train station in Cocoa to NAS Banana River by bus. The tedious trip took about one hour and hauled them east across the Indian River, Banana River, and Sykes Creek over rickety wooden bridges and then south through deep, white sand to the station. Other sailors arrived and found different modes of transportation. Charles Bartberger decided to hire a taxi: “We paid for a taxi...and they’d go as fast as they could go because it was drag time for them, one ride, and they couldn’t get that much money out of us for a ride. But they would fly.”¹⁰³ Despite the method of transportation, the sailors were in for a surprise upon arrival at the base. Initial reactions varied. One of the original crew members, Hal Gettings, recalled: “My first impression was sand. It was all white sand, there was not grass or trees. Five buildings and one road....In fact, when we had commissioning and all of the people came out, most of them got stuck in the sand.”¹⁰⁴ The barrenness of the place amazed many sailors as they emerged from their buses, as did the mosquitoes. While some felt that they were going to earn the overseas pay rumored to be given to those stationed at the harsh location, others saw things differently: “Despite the bleakness at first sight, it was a beautiful spot with the most glorious sunrises and sunsets and the great beach to swim and surf.”¹⁰⁵

Most sailors quickly settled into their new surroundings. While it took some getting used to, the men and women stationed at NAS Banana River learned to deal with the inconveniences associated with living on a base almost entirely surrounded by water, in the middle of nowhere, in Central Florida. The sailors had to adapt to a number of adverse conditions including the water, the mosquitoes, and the weather.

Many of the sailors that were assigned to NAS Banana River had taken their water supply at home for granted. When a water faucet was turned on, the water that flowed forth was drinkable and appropriate for bathing and cleaning. This was not the case at NAS Banana River. Although early plans for the base called for a water system to be constructed that would pump water from the mainland to the station, the high costs and rapid growth prevented those plans from being implemented until much later in the war. The water at the station, therefore, was pumped from shallow wells. The water pulled from these wells was brackish and tasted sharply of sulphur. While most of the locals had no problem with the water, it took some time for the sailors to adjust. Simple, daily exercises were made difficult due to the water situation.

Showering and shaving were a chore for many men. The hard water prevented soap and shaving cream from lathering up, which made shaving a rather painful experience, especially since they were required to be clean-shaven while aboard. The brackish water also made the bathroom fixtures corrode at a rapid rate. Many of them turned black shortly after being installed.

The water available on base was also not suitable for drinking. Many refused to drink it unless it was mixed with something else: “The water was so bad about the only thing it could be used for was “industrial strength” lemonade.”¹⁰⁶ The sailors found alternatives to the water and generally replaced it with soda or beer, when available. As the station grew, the need for potable water became apparent and officials decided to have Cocoa water pumped to the station. For some sailors, the Cocoa water was an improvement but still not drinkable alone. For Hal Gettings, the drinking water took some getting used to and he knew some people who were never quite able to adapt:

I was in a drug store in Eau Gallie and at a lunch counter and there was a visitor there who had something to eat and he asked for a glass of water. And I sat there, and I knew what was going to happen. And he took a big gulp of that water,

tasted it, and he looked at me and said, "I wish I hadn't done that." It was really bad to people who weren't familiar with it.¹⁰⁷

While the water took some getting used to, it was the mosquitoes that really caused problems for the sailors. Mosquitoes made living at the station, and in Brevard County, nearly unbearable. As early as 1938, Brevard County was searching for a way to rid the county of their high mosquito population. The mosquito problem was so pervasive that various civic groups banded together to advocate serious mosquito control and eradication programs for the county. A series of resolutions were passed urging the federal government to get involved so as to eliminate the mosquito problem, which was "a serious menace, not only to the comfort, health and happiness of our citizens, but also a distinct economic disadvantage to the development of this community."¹⁰⁸ A Mosquito Control District was established in November 1938, but by the time sailors began arriving, the mosquito population was still a major nuisance. A survey conducted by the Public Health Service in the Spring of 1942, stated that "the mosquitoes were not of a dangerous variety but that eradication would entail too great a project."¹⁰⁹

Although the mosquitoes did not pose a serious threat to the sailors nor the citizens of Brevard, they took action to try to protect themselves. Most doors and windows had thick screens to keep out the mosquitoes and people often found these screens blanketed with the small pesky insect. Many residences and offices had mosquito beaters placed just outside the door so any errant mosquito could be brushed off before entering the building. Despite stories of having blood soaked uniforms following a return from a night in town, the sailors generally learned to adapt until formal mosquito eradication programs began at NAS Banana River: "If you were out at night, you had to wear long sleeves. We had the good strong on-shore wind that kept the mosquitoes down somewhat. If you had a west wind that all came, over from Merritt Island, it was pretty bad. Something else you lived with."¹¹⁰ Many men began to attach netting to their uniforms and find ways to cohabitate with the mosquitoes. The officials at NAS Banana River acknowledged the problem and eventually authorized a major eradication program at the end of 1944. The station's planes were used to spray the area with a chemical pesticide, DDT. While later proven harmful to the environment, the DDT program at

NAS Banana River proved effective and many sailors gratefully accepted the welcomed reprieve from the mosquitoes.

The water and the mosquito population were nuisances that could eventually be controlled but the weather was another matter. The exemplary weather conditions were one of the primary factors in placing a naval base at Banana River. With a warm climate and large numbers of sunny days, training missions could be conducted throughout the year. The Navy command was not the only group to appreciate these weather conditions. The sailors aboard took full advantage of the sunny, warm weather to enjoy surfing, sunning, and fishing at the beach.

Although the sunny weather provided many benefits for training and entertainment, other weather conditions were not so eagerly welcomed. The cool breezes off the river and the ocean were pleasant unless they brought mosquitoes or sand. White, fine sand blanketed the base and initially inhibited the growth of vegetation. Even if it could provide some comfort to northern sailors used to snow at Christmas, it was generally a hindrance to the operations on the station. If the winds were anything above gentle, “the highway would be covered, sometimes a foot deep, halting all traffic and cutting the station off from the world. The glare was so intense that sun glasses were necessary the year round.”¹¹ The sand became more than an inconvenience when it began to interrupt the operations of the base. On more than one occasion, sabotage was suspected when the culprit was merely sand that had blown into the machinery.

Another weather dilemma was the potential for hurricanes. Luckily for the sailors at NAS Banana River, the site for the station was selected in part because of its close proximity to Cape Canaveral. Hurricanes had typically skirted the Brevard Coast because the Gulf Stream came so close to the coastline. Through the course of the war, several hurricanes came close to hitting the Brevard beaches. In November 1942, a hurricane appeared to be heading straight for the area and the entire base was placed on alert. The personnel and planes at the station escaped that storm but were again faced with hurricanes in September 1944 and again in October 1944. In both cases, the planes at the base were evacuated and dispersed to stations to the north. In one instance, a group of NAS Banana River planes had to leave in such a hurry that they had trouble landing at other bases because those stations were not expecting them at all. Yet, NAS Banana

River was not hit by a major hurricane during World War II. The storms that did skim the shore did minimal, cosmetic damage but still caused some trouble.

When the sailors of NAS Banana River were not swatting mosquitoes or dodging sand storms, they were hard at work. The training schedule was tight and many of the station's personnel worked long hours. They did manage to find some time for extracurricular activities. For the first sailors to come aboard, there was little to do on base. Boredom became a sailor's worst enemy since there was little to do on base and the trips to local towns were few and far between. Most of their early crew spent their extra time at the beach or fishing in the clear waters of the Banana River. A casual game of cards or dominos often sprang up among the men while others made the short trip to a local bar on the beach. As the base grew, the want for entertainment became apparent. The Navy understood that bored sailors were generally unhappy men and authorized funds to build entertainment facilities. By the end of the war, there were numerous activities provided for the sailors at the station including a station newspaper, an organized sports program, an active USO program, and a long list of daily goings on at the station's Welfare and Commissary Buildings.

One of the first things that was provided on base was a station newspaper. The very first issue of *Banana Peelings* was published on April 7, 1942, and was only four pages long. Before the *Banana Peelings*, the sailors had a small weekly column in *The Cocoa Tribune* but it was designed more to provide the community with information about the base. With the first issue in April, *Banana Peelings* became "one of the first service man's papers established in Florida and its size and style has been copied by several new publication during recent months."¹¹² The paper was full of local advertisements, jokes, editorials, and stories with topics ranging from sports to entertainment to personnel and unit profiles. The newspaper's editors often solicited the help of the men for creating stories and getting the station's crew members involved. One such attempt came in 1943 with a Liar's Contest: "*Banana Peelings* is offering ten leaves of that green lettuce, better known as cash, to the three biggest liars on the station. All you liars have to do is send in the 'tallest' story you ever heard...your story will be read and decided upon by a fair and impartial jury of disinterested sailors."¹¹³ The exercise took place and the high number of liars that submitted stories encouraged the

staff to try the stunt again in the future. The demand and popularity of the paper grew and the paper itself expanded to almost twenty pages an edition. Throughout the war, *Banana Peelings* was able to fulfill its mission of providing news and entertainment to the sailors of NAS Banana River.

One of the most popular topics covered in *Banana Peelings* was sports. The station offered a large number of organized and individual sports to keep the sailors occupied during their off hours. The station's Welfare and Recreation Officer ensured that there were plenty of opportunities for the men to enjoy themselves. A bowling alley was built and regularly hosted tournaments and league play. Due to the close proximity to the base, swimming was a popular sport and the station provided a number of lifeguards to ensure the safety of both the recreational and competitive swimmers. NAS Banana River also had regular wrestling and boxing matches, which were popular with both the participants and their audience. Boxing became so popular that the station put calls out for a competitive team in 1943. The team was able to secure permission to "meet other bases in this vicinity and challenges have been mailed...reports have been highly encouraging and prospects are that a number of good matches will be arranged."¹⁴

Boxing was not the only organized sport at the station. NAS Banana River fielded softball, baseball, and football teams throughout the war. Inter-station play would often pit teams from the Personnel Department against the Radio team or the Ordinance Department against the Coast Guard. Almost every unit put together a team and even the station's officers commonly participated by forming their own team. As the war dragged on, the growing military built other bases nearby. The new military installations provided the athletes at NAS Banana River with fresh competition. Sporting events were often coordinated with NAS Melbourne, NAS Vero Beach, and NAS Sanford. These games were a hit with station personnel.

In addition to the sporting events, the personnel at NAS Banana River were often treated to dazzling social events. Throughout much of the war, every other Thursday night meant a social event sponsored by the station. One of those Thursday evenings was set aside for a dance. Women from the surrounding towns were invited to the station and treated to food, fellowship, and of course, dancing: "To ease off some steam, Pete Haas and his boys cut loose with that popular jitterbug tune. This really put the kids in the

groove and they went to town.”¹¹⁵ The other Thursday night was dedicated to a station talent show. These events were equally as popular and gave the men the opportunity to show their stuff. Talents included rousing piano playing, singing, yodeling, harmonica solos, clarinet performances, and even tap dancing. The Amateur Nights occasionally included acts presented by the local townspeople. This was a particular treat considering most of the guest presentations were given by the Cocoettes, the local girls from Cocoa. Amateur Night proved as popular as the dances: “the entertainers put on their acts in a professional manner. We all enjoy and look forward to our monthly NAS Amateur Nights.”¹¹⁶

NAS Banana River personnel were often treated to more than just the local talent. USO Camp Shows were common sources of entertainment for the men. The station crew were regularly treated to USO Shows like “Bublin’ Over,” The Camel Caravan, and “Full Speed Ahead.” The shows generally provided singers, dancers, and comedians and were wildly popular, especially among the young men. The “Bublin Over” show included a performance by Anne Nagel and Dot Wenzel. Miss Wenzel’s performance was particularly enjoyable. After singing a few popular songs, “she casually zipped off her dress and stood clothed in something that resembled a ‘light London fog.’ She then did two tap numbers and was wildly applauded by the appreciative Banana River Boys.”¹¹⁷ Other types of shows stopped by the station to give the men a variety of musical options. Groups like the Manhattan Music Masters provided classical and operatic song and dance. The USO shows, therefore, provided a wide range of entertainment options and were wildly popular at NAS Banana River.

For those not interested in organized sports or social events, there were plenty of other activities to keep them busy. The gymnasium offered various classes to keep the sailors active and in compliance with station orders requiring men under the age of forty to put in at least four hours a week in physical training. A library stocked with books kept sailors intellectually stimulated while regular games of bingo provided additional forms of entertainment. Sailors could keep busy taking any one of the numerous classes offered at the station including course in Spanish and first aid. The Welfare Building offered the soldiers a haircut and also a fountain and bar “manned by four very nice members of the female sex, who make you feel right at home. There are also two girls to

wait on the tables and keep everybody in good humor.”¹¹⁸ A movie theater located on base featured the latest movies twice daily and the Ship’s Service enabled the sailors the shop for swim trunks, pipes, or a gift for their girl in town or back home.

The Navy was also careful to provide spiritual and religious activities for the crew members. NAS Banana River had a full time Chaplain to attend to the religious needs of the men and offered regular church services, bible studies, and Sunday school classes for those who could not or did not want to attend one of the many churches in the surrounding towns. The Chaplain had a column in the *Banana Peelings* and was also quite often very active in the recreational activities on base.

Daily life at the station, however, was not always entertaining. For those living at the base in the late spring and early summer months in 1942, the lurking menace of the German U-boats kept many sailors on edge: “I don’t remember any panic...A lot of people really went ape...stock up on groceries, water, and all that sort of thing. They were pretty scared but I don’t recall it being any more than acceptance and doing what they could.”¹¹⁹ The station on constant alert and were often thrust into action when a merchant ship was attacked off the coast. Once the sinking of ships stopped, threat of a German invasion eased and the crew eased back into its routine.

The training and operational duties of the station were often dangerous as well. Although every measure was taken to ensure that safety was a priority, the hazards associated with the job sometimes took over and resulted in several crashes, injuries and even deaths. Some of the crashes were minor and the result of pilot error. The land planes had several incidents where the pilot ran off the runway into the deep sand. The result of this unwise maneuver was that the plane’s wheels immediately sank into the sand and the forward motion of the plane thrust its nose straight into the ground.

Other crashes and accidents were much more tragic. In July 1942, two such incidents shook the crew of NAS Banana River. On July 5, a sailor was seriously injured when he was struck by a depth charge, which was accidentally released from a plane while it was being loaded. One day later, a patrol plane crashed into a sewage plant shortly after takeoff injuring the pilot and its passenger. In November 1942, a sailor lost his foot when he missed a buoy and caught his leg in the propeller a plane. Some accidents, however, ended in death. Many trainees and pilots lost their lives when their

planes misjudged their landings and crashed at sea. The first death reported at the station occurred in June 1942 when Ensign Keith Peachee, 21, died when his plane crashed into the ocean while trying to investigate debris floating in the water. In November a PBM crashed several miles from the station killing four officers and nine enlisted men. While a great many of the casualties resulted from crashes, others died while servicing the planes. One German POW lost his life at NAS Banana River when he drowned while performing routine clean-up duty. Although the death of a crewmember was a rare occurrence at NAS Banana River, the men who did lose their lives while serving at the station were appropriately honored and remembered at the station.¹²⁰

By the end of the war, NAS Banana River had become a city in itself. A large number of its residents were not satisfied with its offerings and were eager to venture across the river to visit Brevard County's towns. Melbourne, Cocoa, and Eau Gallie were the most popular destinations and each offered its share of distractions for the sailors of NAS Banana River. The residents of these small towns welcomed the military personnel and their dollars.

Obtaining liberty to "go ashore" was a treat but making the trip was not always easy. Very few sailors had automobiles so they had to rely on public transportation. The first regular bus line running from Cocoa to the station was established in 1941. Several prominent businessmen, organized by the Greater Cocoa Chamber of Commerce, purchased a thirty six passenger bus for the exclusive purpose of trucking sailors back and forth between the station and Cocoa: "The schedule of the new bus line calls for seven daily round trips to the Naval Air Station, with the first trip leaving this city at 7:15 each morning. The final trip from Cocoa to the air station will leave this city at 11:30 each night."¹²¹ The inaugural trip was made on April 11, 1941. As the number of personnel at the station grew so, too, did the bus line. Soon bus lines were running from NAS Banana River to Eau Gallie and Melbourne.

The sailors appreciated the regular bus service to the cities but the trip was still a chore. One of the most tedious portions of the trip was crossing the wooden bridges:

And the bridges were rickety rackets. There was a curve in it, and two cars couldn't be going at the same time. One would have to wait for where the bridge was straight for the cars to get around the curve. Then invariably somebody would flick a cigarette out, and there would be a fire on the bridge and the bridge tender

would be seen going with his bucket, putting the bucket down into the river, getting water to put the fire out.¹²²

The driving problems were compounded at night. Because of the blackout rules, the bus operator was not allowed to use his headlights, “So then it was really difficult to drive over there. You drove with your head out the window trying to see the difference between the black pavement and the black sides.”¹²³ As the war continued, numerous pleas were made to the state government to construct better causeways between the major towns and the station. This, however, was not a priority for the state and the noisy, wooden bridges remained for much of the war.

Once the journey was finally complete, the sailors had various sources of entertainment in town. The residents of Brevard County wholeheartedly welcomed the men into their homes and businesses. Shopping was a popular pastime in town, especially during Christmas. Stores such as Johnson’s and Dennis-Medvene in Melbourne and Mather’s and Alderman’s in Cocoa provided the sailors with plenty of options. Each advertised in *Banana Peelings* and encouraged the men to do their personal and gift shopping at their businesses.

The towns also provided a welcome spot for the sailors to fill their stomachs. The men could buy their food at the Piggly Wiggly or stop at Coleman’s Pastry Shop for fresh baked goods. They frequently ate at Joe’s and Carl’s or on special occasions, dined at The Palms Cocktail Bar and Restaurant or Norwood’s Casino. Ashley’s and Jack’s Tavern were local late night hot spots. Many of these businesses were eager to attract the sailor’s business and catered to their needs: “The people and merchants of Cocoa couldn’t have been kinder or more hospitable; they not only took us to their hearts, but the merchants issued us scrip so we could purchase the necessities. And if we didn’t have scrip, we could sign IOUs.”¹²⁴ The restaurants and bars were also popular date spots.

Many of the men found that the stress of Navy life was relieved a bit with alcohol. Drinking beer and liquor was a common activity on base as a way to combat the loneliness and boredom. A bar on the beach gave the men easy access to alcohol as did their bunk space: “They had what they called a liquor closet in the BOQ (Bachelor’s Officer’s Quarters), a small bar and a few stools and somebody behind tending

bar...you'd buy a bottle and you put a name on it and it would be up on the shelf."¹²⁵

While the base bars helped, it was Brevard County that provided the sailors with what they wanted in the form of spirits. Many of the bars advertised in the *Banana Peelings* with Ashley's Tavern and Jack's Tavern being the most popular. These establishments catered to the drinking habits of the sailors and many became regulars: "A lot of the sailors were interested in drinking and that sort of stuff, and I did a little of that too...there were really two groups of sailors. We referred to us as the zeros and the local 400s...we referred to them as the group that liked to hang out in bars...we had plenty of those."¹²⁶

While many men enjoyed cruising about town frequenting the local stores, eateries, and bars, others preferred more active ways to keep busy in town. Some of the local hotels, built for the tourist and building boom of the 1920s, became popular hangouts. The Melbourne Beach Casino and the Tradewinds Hotel both had pools where sailors could enjoy a freshwater swim. The Tradewinds, in Indialantic, however, was more exclusive and generally reserved for use by the officers. The hotel was grand and "it was suspected, owned by the Kennedy family. A fellow from West Palm Beach bought it...during the war and before the war it was a very exclusive place to stay. It had a beautiful lobby and the grounds were lovely. We never went, it was usually an Officer's Club."¹²⁷ These more active spots were also popular on the local dating scene.

Dating was one of the sailor's favorite pastimes in the towns. Navy men could be found stalking the sidewalks looking for a date to the next dance or for some company during dinner. Since most of the men stationed at NAS Banana River were young and single, the courting of the local girls was common and generally accepted amongst the townspeople. Men with girlfriends were always trying to set up their buddies on blind dates. Sailors and their dates became commonplace at the local movie theaters and restaurants. Many of the men stationed at NAS Banana River married local women during the war or came back for them at the conflict's conclusion.

The townspeople were not only eager to welcome the NAS Banana River crew into their businesses but also their homes: "Well that was the biggest thing that happened in Brevard County since the Civil War, I guess. People were very welcoming."¹²⁸ Many of the local families "adopted" groups of sailors and had them over regularly for dinner

or took them to church on Sundays. Many residents also threw parties to entertain the sailors. One of Cocoa's most prominent citizens, Marie Holderman, owner and editor of *The Cocoa Tribune* was well known for her lavish get-togethers. Both enlisted men and officers attended her popular parties. The hostess provided "drinks and conversation. Frozen daiquiris and that sort of thing. Mrs. Holderman had a collection of party records, some of them risqué...bridge and all, there was plenty to do."¹²⁹ Parties were particularly popular during the holiday season. Thanksgiving and Christmas parties, whether formal or held in private homes, were always appreciated by the sailors far from home. While the party scene was well liked, other families preferred to invite sailors on fishing trips or other out of town excursions and treat them to all that Brevard County had to offer.

One of the most important contributions the residents of Brevard County made to the sailors of NAS Banana River was the construction of service clubs. The city of Cocoa in particular pushed for the construction of both an officer's and enlisted club to entertain the men while they were in town. Beginning in July 1941, Cocoa officials fought for funds to build a recreation building. They applied to the Public Works Administration for a \$10,000 recreation center "for use by the men of Banana River Naval Air Station...when they come to Cocoa on shore leave, a place where they may go to enjoy relaxation and recreation of a nature that is tended to fit them for good service to their country."¹³⁰ Cocoa was granted the money by the federal government in November and construction began in early 1942. The club was opened on March 29, 1942 and served as an important leisure space for the men throughout the war. The service club regularly hosted dances and parties, which were always well attended by the station personnel and the townspeople.

While the service club opened by the city of Cocoa catered to the enlisted men, the officers were not left without a place to let loose. In September 1942, an officer's club was opened in the Cocoa House. The Cocoa Recreation Defense Association spearheaded the opening of the club and it was announced that "the club rooms will be opened each day. All officers are invited to use the room when they are in Cocoa."¹³¹ While the officers relaxed in their own quarters, another group of sailors was given a space to use while in Cocoa. In May 1943, the Recreation Center for Colored Servicemen was opened. Chaplain Joseph W. Lyons of the NAS Banana River

championed the center and was credited for “the deep interest displayed in helping the officer’s stewards to establish this form of entertainment which was so badly needed in Cocoa.”¹³²

The Brevard County towns took every opportunity to outwardly show their gratitude to the Navy men stationed nearby. Every October, the Navy celebrated Navy Day and invited, when possible, the surrounding communities to inspect their installations. NAS Banana River hosted its own Navy Day celebrations in October 1940 and invited the public to visit the station. The following year, the station could not allow citizens on base because of the presence of so much sensitive military equipment. The station did not disappoint, however, and instead conducted an exhibition of flying: “Navy Day is a day when the entire Navy passes in review...All of the patrol planes of this squadron will fly in low formation between Cocoa and Melbourne.”¹³³ The following year and for the years that followed, it was the residents that sponsored the Navy Day events. The tables were turned and on the usual Navy Day, the communities turned out to salute the Navy. In 1942 the city of Cocoa decided to abandon the traditional Armistice Day celebrations and replace them with a day of salutations to the United States Navy. The celebrations closed all local business and included a fish fry, a parade, and a baseball game. Similar festivities were held on Navy Day throughout the remainder of the war.

NAS enjoyed the exclusive attention of Brevard County residents until the construction of another Naval Air Station in Melbourne. NAS Melbourne was opened at the Melbourne-Eau Gallie Municipal Airport on October 20, 1942 as a fighter training base. The men of NAS Banana River competed with the sailors from NAS Melbourne for the attentions of the townspeople, especially with the ladies. The city of Melbourne welcomed both groups but as the station grew in Melbourne, more and more sailors from Banana River stayed in Cocoa. The sailors from the two bases rarely interacted unless it was on the playing field or at the supply and repair shop at NAS Banana River: “Melbourne Naval Air Station is primarily a training base for fighter pilots. This was an operational base here so there was a difference. I didn’t hardly know anybody. In fact, I didn’t know anybody.”¹³⁴

Brevard County almost became home to yet another military base during World War II. With NAS Melbourne in the southern portion of the county and NAS Banana River in the central part, the citizens of northern Brevard were thrilled to hear news of a proposed Marine Glider base going in just south of Titusville. In June, the newspapers reported that the Marine Corps had selected the site for a glider training station. By July, rumors had surfaced expressing concern over the site selected. Senator Charles O. Andrews expressed his frustration over the situation: “Unfortunately it appears that someone announced the selection of the Titusville location before the matter had been passed upon and thus it has become involved in quite a controversy as well as disappointment.”¹³⁵ The final hopes for north Brevard in recruiting their own military installation were dashed in October when word came the proposed site in Titusville would be too expensive and the project was abandoned. The citizens of Brevard picked up and continued to send their residents to work and play with the soldiers at NAS Banana River.

The dedication of the local residents was not wasted on the sailors of NAS Banana River. Their frequent patronage at local businesses and town events illustrated their appreciation. Many of the men were forever indebted to the residents of Brevard County for providing them with a home away from home during their years of service. As early as 1942, the station’s crew thanked the citizens of Brevard:

The Sailors of the Naval Air Station, Banana River want to say thanks to the citizens of Melbourne, Cocoa, and Eau Gallie for doing more than their part to make the sailors feel welcome in these towns. None of them is a large town but their friendliness toward the Enlisted Men of Banana River always makes it a pleasure to board the bus and go in to spend the evening. The ‘welcome mats’ are always out...and we hope that each and every sailor remembers that his whole station’s reputation is at stake as well as his own, and never does anything to destroy the ‘welcome’ we are use to receiving while in town.¹³⁶

The sailors looked to the local towns to provide them with things to do and also places to live.

One of the biggest problems for both NAS Banana River and the surrounding communities was the lack of adequate housing. On more than one occasion, a unit arrived at the station and had no place to stay. When the original crewmembers arrived at

the station, they were forced to sleep on the floor of the unfinished barracks. Because of its rapid growth, the station had difficulties keeping up with its growing population.

Most of the available housing on base was reserved for the single sailors. The degree of comfort offered by the living quarters increased the higher the rank of the sailor. The enlisted men's barracks needed to be expanded throughout the war. Most single, enlisted sailors lived in these vast quarters. They were lined with bunk beds and large groups of men called these huge rooms, with hundreds of roommates, home during their stay at NAS Banana River. The Bachelor Officers Quarters, the BOQ, was a little more comfortable and the officers did not have to share their rooms with nearly as many other sailors. The Commanding Officer and the Executive Officer lived well in houses built for them directly on the beach.

With the exception of the Commanding and Executive Officers, the sailors with families were forced to find alternative housing off base. Some of the men were already married and brought their families to Brevard while they trained at the station. Other sailors met and married local women and were forced to search out places to establish a home. Early in the war, this was a difficult chore. Some residents opened portions of their homes and rented them to Navy couples but these were snatched up as quickly as they became available. When Mary Eason moved to Brevard County to join her husband who was a radioman at NAS Banana River, she found that the apartment her husband had found for them was no longer available: "We found a place in a motel...and the guy charged us \$1.00 a night. We stayed there a week. Then finally the Oleander's Hotel, I went up there, and they had an opening, and for \$10 a week we stayed at the Oleander's Hotel."¹³⁷ Other sailors found empty homes to rent and then share the costs with another couple. The Easons got lucky and finally found a place to rent in a beautiful old house owned by an elderly woman who needed assistance getting around. The entire experience, however, was not easy: "Housing was very tight. It was extremely difficult to get any place at all to live. The best we had hoped for was to get a room in somebody's house. And fortunately we ended up in this lovely home with the condition that we would transport her around if necessary."¹³⁸

The Brevard County officials recognized the severe lack of housing. Problems had begun when the initial influx of workers demanded housing as they built the station.

The situation worsened once the sailors began to arrive. In March 1941, the Greater Cocoa Chamber of Commerce President Julian Langner announced that the city was severely lacking adequate housing. According to Langner, “sufficient housing must be made available to take care of the men and their families who will be brought here as a result of the new construction work at the base. There will be an additional number of married civilian and enlisted personnel at the base as well as married officers.”¹³⁹ Shortly afterwards, the Chamber appealed to the Federal Housing Administration and pointed out the desperate situation: “We shall be unable to care for the demand of Navy personnel; we shall perhaps have provided for school facilities for an additional 200 to 300 pupils , BUT WE WILL NOT HAVE ANY HOUSES FOR THE FATHERS AND MOTHERS OF THESE PUPILS TO LIVE IN.”¹⁴⁰

Relief arrived in July when word came that the President had authorized the construction of fifty houses for families of enlisted men following the designation of Cocoa as a defense housing area. In January 1942, construction began on an additional eighty houses in Cocoa Beach to serve the troops at NAS Banana River. That same month, a \$300,000 housing project was approved in Rockledge:

[The] first major impact of the Banana River Naval Air Base upon the local community was felt this week with the announcement that the United States Housing Authority would build eighty new homes for defense workers. Those eighty houses will partly solve the housing problem...which has been acute since the Banana River base added to its permanent staff of officers and civilian employees.¹⁴¹

These homes were to be utilized not by the sailors but by the civilian workers who had arrived in Brevard County to work at the station. The county’s housing situation was even relieved even further when it was announced in February 1942 that two more defense housing projects for NAS Banana River crewmembers were to be awarded to Cocoa Beach. The modest two and three bedroom houses being built were partially financed by the Federal Housing Administration.

Despite the activity of 1942, the housing situation again became a problem in 1943. The Greater Cocoa Chamber of Commerce put out a call to all property owners to list their available spaces for rent or sale: “We want as many people as want to do so to make their homes here. They are all prospective future citizens...We are facing a severe

housing shortage...There are officers, enlisted, and civilian personnel of the Banana River Naval Air Station and their families who want to rent homes in this community.”¹⁴² Although additional housing was built to ease the situation, the housing shortage remained a problem for NAS Banana River and the surrounding communities. The large amount of housing constructed, however, would later help support the growing population in Brevard County.

As the war drew to a conclusion in 1945, the outlook for NAS Banana River and Brevard County seemed hopeful. The station was to downsize but remain open, which meant continuing economic activity for the local communities. What the citizens of Brevard County did not know was that they were on the horizon of an entirely new era. The lessons learned and the infrastructure laid during the war years would help Brevard County prepare for an exciting and vibrant chapter in its history.

CHAPTER 4: AFTER THE STORM: NAS BANANA RIVER AND THE FUTURE OF BREVARD COUNTY

After four long years of fighting, rationing, sacrifice, and worry, World War II ended in August 1945. The war machines of Adolf Hitler's Germany and Hirohito's Japan had been silenced. Americans enthusiastically welcomed the end of combat and took pride in the role the United States had played in the conflict. Families and communities rejoiced as they greeted their war weary sons and daughters and brought them back into the fold. The veterans, however, were not returning to the same United States they had left behind. The wakening of the "sleeping giant" had a profound effect on the country.

Brevard County was no exception. The county had drastically changed in the years between 1939 and 1945. The citizens of Brevard County had fought for the establishment of a military installation along the Banana River prior to American involvement in World War II. Their persistence paid off and the result of their labors was the creation of NAS Banana River. With America's entrance into World War II in 1941, NAS Banana River grew into a major military installation. This growth translated into the expansion of the surrounding communities as they struggled to meet the continually growing needs of the men and women stationed at NAS Banana River. The changes in the community were apparent. Brevard County had emerged from the war a vibrant community eagerly looking towards the future. The expectations that the county officials had when attracting the station to Brevard had far exceeded their visions.

The changes in the community could be directly associated with the station. Men who had left a small, peaceful, and dormant community returned to find a vibrant population eager to continue to prosperity of the war years. Sailors who had called Naval Air Station Banana River and Brevard County home had a difficult time leaving their new home. They, too, had seen the changes at the station and in the surrounding towns. What many of the sailors did not realize is that they had helped to transform those sleepy towns dreaming of the big time into dynamic, revitalized towns eager to capitalize on the

hard earned advancements achieved during the war. The existence of NAS Banana River had contributed to the rapid population increase during the war and also to many physical changes. At the end of World War II, the citizens of Brevard County had no way of knowing that NAS Banana would also help to place the county on the forefront of world events in the coming decades.

By the end of 1945, the need for a full American military arsenal had decreased but NAS Banana River continued to flourish. In January 1946, a sixty unit low cost housing unit was opened just off the base to house the navy personnel at the station. The training mission of the station, however, began to decrease, as the Navy no longer needed the same number of trainees in the post-war world. While new homes were being made available to the sailors, the Navy announced that the Air Bombers Training Unit was to be discontinued at NAS Banana River. The other units maintained their programs on a wartime level but ran into problems as individual sailors began to be discharged. As of March 1946, there were approximately 631 officers, and 3,194 enlisted men at the station but another 172 officers and 1, 492 enlisted men had been processed for demobilization since January.¹⁴³ The decrease in military personnel resulted in the loss of civilian workers as well. Many of the non-military workers at the station were wives and relatives of the sailors and they left when their sailor was discharged or reassigned. The amount of work, therefore, remained the same while the number of sailors decreased due to the Navy's peacetime reduction in personnel.

The later half of 1946 brought a surprising increase in personnel and aircraft. The number of sailors aboard tripled when a torpedo squadron from NAS Ft. Lauderdale and a fighter squadron from NAS Miami were transferred to NAS Banana River.¹⁴⁴ The increased activity was short lived. While two new units were assigned to the base, the number of sailors in other units continued to fall. By 1947, the shortage of personnel, both Navy and civilian, began to take its toll on the station: "The enlisted complement...was progressively reduced on the first of each month until the ultimate figure of 1,128 ratings was reached on 1 March 1947. This figure was established as the tentative postwar enlisted allowance for the Naval Air Station, Banana River, Florida."¹⁴⁵ As the workload continued to operate on a high level, both officers and enlisted men were forced to acquire additional duties to make up the slack.

Rumors started to circulate throughout Brevard County in April and May of 1947 that the future of NAS Banana River was in jeopardy. NAS Melbourne had been decommissioned in early 1946. The citizens of Brevard worried that the same fate was to befall NAS Banana River despite pre-war promises that the station was a permanent military installation. A letter writing campaign began as concerned residents demanded to know the status of the station. United States Representative Joe Hendricks, instrumental in getting the base located in Brevard County, was swamped with telegrams and letters.

The Banana River Naval Air Base Committee was reactivated to lobby for the continuation of the station. C. Sweet Smith, chairman of the committee wrote: "There are persistent rumors that the Banana River Naval Air Base is to be put on caretaker status July 15. It is a severe shock to Central Florida. It is deplorable to all of us to think that there is any possibility of Banana River not being expanded and utilized as its natural advantages warrant."¹⁴⁶ Messages continued to pour into Representative Hendricks' office from individuals, businesses, and organizations in Brevard. Many of the letters to Representative Hendricks had a desperate and forceful tone. Sam Culler, President of the Cocoa Retail Merchants Association wrote: "This base was set up as a permanent station under the Hepburn Board. Our economy and citizens have geared their activities on this assurance. Closing now would be disastrous to Central Florida."¹⁴⁷ The American Legion Post Commander, Jimmie Keezel, expressed similar sentiments: "Three hundred veterans now employed at this station, many of whom have invested in homes in that area understanding this to be a permanent base. Closing this base would result in much unemployment and economic chaos."¹⁴⁸ Robert C. Dewitt wrote Representative Hendricks and told of the direct impact on him and his family: "The Banana River Naval Air Station being put on an inactive status will lower our volume to such a point that I may lose my job and my home that I am building...As a veteran of World War II, I am bitter over the prospects of losing everything because the Armed Forces which I served can not keep their promises."¹⁴⁹

The citizens of Brevard County also pleaded their case with Florida's United States Senator Claude Pepper. J.F. Wilkinson wrote: "If this base is placed on inactive status as contemplated by the Navy it will not only be throwing away a twenty-five

million dollar installation which is second to none but it will be throwing hardship on many.”¹⁵⁰ The Greater Cocoa Chamber of Commerce defended the need for NAS Banana River and relayed its concerns to the Senator: “Cocoa, like many other cities in this area, is acutely aware of the fact that the prosperity of its economy is largely dependent upon the personnel of the Banana River Naval Air Station. The complete interruption of this purchasing power would be disastrous.”¹⁵¹ Both Senator Pepper and Representative Hendricks put the blame on the Republican Party’s successful attempts to cut the Navy’s budget and pledged their support for the continued operation of NAS Banana River.

In addition to the letter writing campaign, the Banana River Naval Air Base Committee sent a contingent to Washington, D.C. to urge the Navy to reconsider its actions. They were able to wrangle a meeting with Under Secretary for Air, John Nicholaw Brown, Senator Claude Pepper, and Senator Spessard Holland in June 1947. The committee members lobbied Under Secretary Brown and were backed by strong support from both Senators. Senator Holland claimed “when he was Governor of Florida the state expended more money for roads and bridges to this base on the statement that it was a permanent base, than was spent on any other base in Florida.”¹⁵² Their attempts to save the base, however, were in vain. By mid-June, however, a disappointed Representative Hendricks notified Marie Holderman of *The Cocoa Tribune* that “without equivocation that there is no base training program to remain at Banana River...Sorry I was not on Navy Appropriations Subcommittee. Had I been I might have been able to do more.”¹⁵³ Ironically, Representative Hendricks was appointed to that subcommittee shortly afterwards. The news that NAS Banana River was to be placed on caretaker status was not welcomed in Brevard County: “It came as a severe shock to us when we learned that only the land and runways would be maintained and the remainder of this magnificent installation would, in effect, be abandoned.”¹⁵⁴

Ironically, the decision to deactivate NAS Banana River increased the amount of activity at the station during the summer of 1947. The deactivation process involved the transfer all units to NAS Jacksonville and other major bases, and the gradual transition to caretaker status took a great deal of work on the part of the personnel remaining at the station. A station wide farewell dance was held on Friday, June 20, as the station’s

personnel wrapped up the final preparations. One thousand people attended the dance, the last to be held at NAS Banana River. The station was formally deactivated on August 1, 1947, and by the end of September 1947, only 13 officers, 184 enlisted men, and 254 civilians remained on board.¹⁵⁵ The deactivation process continued through the year and by December 1947, the station had completed the transition and was placed on caretaker status.

With the station closed, many in Brevard County thought that history had run its course with NAS Banana River. The station had helped the area rebound after the Depression and saw it gently through World War II but now its buildings were deteriorating as the station sat idle. Beginning in 1940, however, the station had done much more than bring business to the area. Brevard County had been changed by the operations at NAS Banana River both with an influx of people but also by providing the county with some much needed infrastructure to allow for future growth.

When NAS Banana River opened in 1940, the population of Brevard County was 16,142. By 1950, the number of people calling Brevard County their permanent home had grown to 23,653.¹⁵⁶ The population growth was directly related to NAS Banana River. The operation of the base required a large number of sailors but also a rather sizable contingent of civilian workers. Many workers answered the call to build the station and continued to have a job when the station continued to grow following America's entrance into World War II. While the station brought men to the area, it also brought their wives and families and they found homes in the surrounding communities. While many of these families departed once their family member was reassigned or released from military service, some were so enamored with the area that they remained in Brevard County permanently. Hal Gettings invited his family down from Missouri for a visit: "my family had come down here and visited and they liked it so much that they moved down here...so this became my home address...when in the Navy."¹⁵⁷ Other sailors returned to Brevard County to marry the women they had dated. James Herndon met, dated, and married a Brevard County woman while at NAS Banana River. He was transferred to another base when the station closed but eventually decided to return to Brevard County: "Well, she was from here. So we just decided we'd settle down here."¹⁵⁸ Many of the sailors stationed at NAS Banana River returned after the war to

settle and restart their lives. The increased population in the post-war years allowed the economy of the area to remain steady and also provided an available work force for the future.

While the population increase helped to stabilize Brevard County after World War II, it is the actual physical changes that were of real long-term benefit to the county. The construction of NAS Banana River required that a great deal of infrastructure be put in place both as the station was being built and also to support its rapid growth. The existence of NAS Banana River, therefore, contributed to the expansion of Brevard County's infrastructure.

Before the base could be built, several support systems had to be constructed so that it could function properly. One of the first improvements required was to dredge the Banana River so as to create a larger landmass on which the station could be built and also to provide a channel deep enough for the seaplanes to operate. Before the dredging job, much of the Banana River was very shallow and left only a thin waterway that was navigable. The sand and silt removed from the river created a deep-water channel between the station and Merritt Island, which allowed for large vessels, both commercial and recreational, to sail easily through the Banana River. Other concerns also needed to be addressed before sailors could begin arriving. Prior to the construction of the station, the strip of land on which the base was located was uninhabited. Sufficient electrical lines had to be run across from the mainland to station and water wells had to be dug in order to support the base population. Once the basic infrastructure was in place, the building of the base began.

The building and subsequent rapid expansion of NAS Banana River resulted in increased pressure on Brevard County's infrastructure. It was necessary, therefore, to provide additional systems to sustain the station's population and the county residents. The station personnel worked alongside the county, state, and federal governments to develop and fund housing, road, water, and mosquito eradication programs.

One of the major problems for Brevard County during World War II was the shortage of adequate housing. Brevard County was not prepared for the large influx of sailors requiring off base housing. They appealed to the Federal Housing Administration and hundreds of houses were built throughout the war to accommodate both military and

civilian personnel at the station. These houses were not abandoned when the station was deactivated and instead remained at full occupancy. The need for the housing of NAS Banana River men resulted in the construction of numerous neighborhoods and subsequently in an increased tax base for Brevard County and its towns.

One of the most vital additions to the county's infrastructure was the creation and betterment of the roads serving the station. Before the construction of NAS Banana River, most of the roads serving the barrier islands were not paved and were, therefore, entirely inadequate to support a naval air station. The narrow causeways across the Indian and Banana Rivers were made of wood and were subject to frequent fires and maintenance needs. The Navy requested the cooperation of the state to build adequate access roads and to improve the existing road system, and following a great deal of wrangling over the financing, several road projects were authorized.

The first project was to build new bridges leading out to the base from Cocoa. Although these new bridges were also made of wood, they were a huge improvement over the previous connections. The state also funded a project to pave the roads running from the causeway to A1A along the Atlantic Coast that led to the station. The project cost nearly \$1,000,000 and was quickly followed by a \$218,000 plan to pave A1A north of the station to the coastal city of Cocoa Beach. Repairs were made to the bridges running from Eau Gallie and Melbourne.¹⁵⁹ The final project was a concrete causeway built across the Indian River from Melbourne, with state funds, to serve as a reliable, major supply line to NAS Banana River. Ironically, the bridge was not completed until shortly after the closing of the station in 1947.

Two other major programs implemented as a result of the needs at NAS Banana River were a fresh water system leading to the station and also a mosquito eradication program. The poor quality of water on the station reached crisis level as the base welcomed more sailors. The initial wells produced barely potable water but not a sufficient amount to support the thousands of men living and working under the hot Florida sun. Navy officials worked extensively with Brevard County officials and were finally able to alleviate the problem by pumping water over from Cocoa. This initial system was later improved and provided a solid example for bringing water over to the Atlantic Coast in the future. Another long-standing problem in Brevard County was the

mosquitoes. The colossal mosquito population was a countywide problem but was especially aggravating to the implanted sailors. While initially viewed as too great a problem to solve, advancements in pesticides resulted in a joint eradication program between the station and the county in 1944. Funded in large part by the county, the program utilized Navy planes and personnel to mix concentrations of DDT and then spray the chemical pesticide over the swamp lands in Brevard. Although the program never completely eliminated the mosquito population, it “was closely watched by other government activities who suffer from mosquito infestation.”¹⁶⁰ After the closing of the station in 1947, the mosquito eradication program continued with the NAS Banana River plan as the model.

The buildings on the base were the final ingredients to the infrastructure improvements made as a result of the existence of NAS Banana River in Brevard County. Although they were falling into disrepair as the result of neglect by the Navy, they were still available for potential future use by a government or private entity. While the citizens had been petrified of what the closing of NAS Banana River could do to their local economy, the reality was that the population and infrastructure growth that resulted from the operation of the station had helped them to prosper despite the station’s closure. Despite their fears, the citizens of Brevard were prepared for the future and actually experienced economic growth equal to the boom in the 1920s in 1948. Materials and loans were plentiful and the county was able to build upon the existing infrastructure.¹⁶¹

Although NAS Banana River had been deactivated in August 1947 and its buildings were languishing in disrepair, the station was about to become a major factor in bringing a new industry to Brevard County. During World War II, Germany had led the world in the advancement of rocketry. The V-1 and V-2 rockets developed and launched against Allied targets were of great interest to the American military. When Germany collapsed, many of its rocket scientists were brought to the United States to work on programs for the American military. Their work was of special interest to the United States because of a new threat that had risen out of the victory in World War II. Russia, an ally during the war, had become a formidable adversary. Representative Joe Hendricks expressed his concerns in a letter to the Greater Cocoa Chamber of Commerce. According to Representative Hendricks, the Republicans in Congress had reduced the

military budget to such a degree to pose a threat to national security, which was something he could not fathom: “I cannot understand their way of thinking in the light of Russia’s activities. Russia can understand force, and force alone. We would not have to use it if we had it, but if we do not have it we may have to resort to it later.”¹⁶² The concern over Russia’s military might and potential interests in various portions of the globe caused a great deal of tension, which quickly developed into the Cold War.

The Cold War brought the United States military back to Florida’s Atlantic Coast. America needed to maintain its technological edge in order to protect itself against Russian threats. The different branches of the military began to research rocket and missile technology and had been developing experimental weapons systems that needed to be tested. As early as 1945, the New Weapons Committee under the Joint Chief of Staff acknowledged the need for a Long Range Proving Ground (LRPG) to test the new technology. The branches soon joined their resources and formed the Research and Development Board, which was given the authority to search for potential sites for the LRPG.

The Research and Development Board’s initial study took it to a potential site in Australia. The Board was forced to abandon this site because of logistical problems; following a test, the missile data and developmental objects needed to be taken back to the manufacturer for evaluation and then improved upon. Because the Australia site was 6,000 miles away, this portion of the testing was logistically impossible due to the distance. The government decided, therefore, to place the LRPG somewhere in the continental United States. The Research and Development Board had conducted a survey of “many possible geographic areas with the final results indicating that two locations were head and shoulders above all others.”¹⁶³ The two finalists were El Centro, California and Cape Canaveral, Florida. Following an in depth analysis of both locations, the Board forwarded its final recommendation to the War Department in July 1947. Although the decision would not be made public for another two years, the site decided upon was Cape Canaveral, Florida.

There were many factors that went into the decision to recommend Cape Canaveral as the LRPG. Many of the same physical conditions that attracted the Navy to build NAS Banana River in Brevard County during the late 1930s persuaded the

Research and Development Board to locate the LRPG Cape Canaveral. One of the advantages to the Florida location was the landmass itself. The Cape extended out into the ocean, which made it possible to launch test missiles over the water. From there, the missiles could be tracked at points along the Florida coast and also from the numerous islands in the Atlantic. The British had given the United States permission to use their airspace over their possessions in the Atlantic making the site even more attractive to the Board.

The climate of the area was also an important factor. Although Florida was a peninsula and, therefore, vulnerable to hurricanes, Cape Canaveral was located close to the Gulf Stream whose warm waters often shifted the immense storms away from the Cape. The sunshine and warm weather also allowed for almost year-round testing as it had permitted continuous training operations at NAS Banana River.

One of the major attractions to Brevard's coast for the Navy was its isolation. The same was true of the location at Cape Canaveral, which provided several benefits. Because the Cape was distant from the nearest town, the land around the Cape was undeveloped with a very small population. These two characteristics allowed for three very important details in the establishment of the LRPG. First, the lack of a significant, immediate population made the acquisition of the land relatively easy. Condemnation proceedings to clear a five-mile radius around the launch site at Cape Canaveral would not push a significant number of inhabitants off their land. Second, the isolation of the spot allowed for ease in preparing for the security of operations. Cape Canaveral was located on one of the barrier islands and, therefore, was separated from the mainland by the Banana River, Merritt Island, and the Indian River. Third, the fact that the site and its immediate surroundings were lightly populated ensured that there would be no populations to endanger in missile testing. If a test went awry and the missile did not head towards the Atlantic, the errant objects would land in a sparsely populated area, thus reducing the risk of injury. The Cape Canaveral location also allowed for potential expansion. If the need arose "there was ample room for expansion far into the South Atlantic to seaward and toward the sparsely populated Merritt Island."¹⁶⁴

Another major advantage to the Cape Canaveral site was the existence of the facilities at the decommissioned NAS Banana River. Although the station was not in

perfect condition because of exposure to the elements and neglect, it had an “airfield, hangars, which could be used for missile assembly and the necessary administrative and technical support buildings.”¹⁶⁵ The World War II station, which had provided important training and support functions during the war and then deemed surplus by the Navy in post-war cutbacks, was now seen as a major advantage in locating the LRPG at Cape Canaveral.

While the recommendations for the LRPG were being moved through the War Department and then Congress, preparations were being made in Florida. Rumors began to swirl in Brevard County that NAS Banana River was to be reactivated. An excited public demanded information: “There have been many rumors here regarding the reopening of the facilities located at the Banana River Naval Air Station...we consider it logical to inquire of you if you have any information regarding these rumors.”¹⁶⁶ In September 1948, the rumors were confirmed when it was announced that the status of NAS Banana River was being changed: “The Banana River Naval Air Station, Cocoa Beach, Florida, has been transferred from the Navy to the U.S. Air Force. The installation will be maintained by the Air Force on an inactive status pending possible utilization in future Air Force expansion.”¹⁶⁷ Although plans had already been made for the future use of the station, the residents of Brevard County would have to wait until the following year to discover those plans.

Rumors again began to circulate around Brevard as to the potential mission of NAS Banana River. In early May 1949, Senator Claude Pepper announced that after speaking with the Chief of the Guided Missiles Project that “the Joint Services, Army, Navy, and Air Force, have selected Banana River as the site for this project. I am sure the people of that area will give the same fine cooperation in the future that they have in the past to the armed services.”¹⁶⁸ After some difficult wrangling in Congress (the Chairman of the Armed Services Committee in the Senate wanted a survey of sites other than Banana River), a law was passed and on May 11, 1949, President Harry S Truman signed Public Law 60 officially creating the Joint Long Range Proving Ground (JLRPG). The location of the site to be jointly used by the Army, Navy, and Air Force was officially announced to the public on June 2, 1949:

The Cape Canaveral Area was selected because the climate was suitable for year round operation, and that the area was relatively uninhabited and undeveloped and hence it would not be difficult to acquire and clear those portions of the area within about five miles of the launching points on the Cape proper and because the nearby Banana River Naval Air Station could be utilized as a headquarters base for supporting technical, logistical, and administrative facilities.¹⁶⁹

Appropriations for the JLRPG finally made it through Congress. The project was allocated \$75 million to be used over the next two years in building and developing the program. The former NAS Banana River was reactivated on October 1, 1949 as the Joint Long Range Proving Ground.

October 1949 marked the beginning of massive development in missile and rocket technology. Thousands of tests were conducted at the JLRPG through the 1950s. Not every test and every design was a complete success. One design, the SNARK, was notorious for its failures. The waters off Cape Canaveral became known as SNARK infested areas. Despite the failures, countless advancements were made at the proving grounds. In the mid-1950s, the attention shifted to sending rockets into space and advancing the possibilities of aerospace technologies. Companies flocked to the JLRPG to offer their expertise and services. The former NAS Banana River was renamed Patrick Air Force Base in 1950 and served as the headquarters for the JLRPG. It also served as an assembly point; the missiles and rockets were assembled at the base and then trucked up to Cape Canaveral for testing.

As NAS Banana River had done in the years before, the JLRPG attracted thousands of workers to Brevard County. Even more people began to flock to the area once the federal government decided to consolidate its aerospace efforts into one agency, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). The American efforts to put rockets and satellites into space were rapidly advanced so that the United States would win the space race with Russia. Brevard County became the center of activity as masses of people came to work and live in the county. Rapid population growth, by 1960 the county population had reached 111,435, and a building boom resulted, and the aerospace industry came to be and still is, associated with Brevard County, Florida.¹⁷⁰

The Brevard County officials that had compelled the American military to construct a Naval Air Station along the Banana River had no idea that their efforts would

have such a lasting impact on the people of the county, the state, the country, and even the world. As hoped, the NAS Banana River revitalized the Brevard County economy and helped to bring people to the area. Throughout the war, the station served as an important training and operational center and the citizens of the surrounding communities rallied around the station and made the sailors part of their collective lives. NAS Banana River had lived up to the hopes that the county had placed on it when it was built. The residents of Brevard County were not only given a new economic outlook but also a solid infrastructure and population base that would serve as the foundation for the future growth that came with the space program. The stage was set for the future and within twenty years of its closure, NAS Banana River had helped the United States put a man on the moon. The naval air station built along the Banana River to defend the Atlantic Coast had instead gone far beyond initial expectations. The NAS Banana River instead helped to lay the foundations for future growth, which would put Brevard County on the map and make the county one of the best known in the United States.

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APPENDIX A, HUMAN SUBJECTS RESEARCH APPROVAL



Office of the Vice President
for Research
Tallahassee, Florida 32306-2763
(850) 644-5260 • FAX (850) 644-4392

APPROVAL MEMORANDUM

from the Human Subjects Committee

Date: August 12, 2002

From: David Quadagno, Chair *DQ/HW*

To: Melissa W Euziere
341 Tuscany Way #302
Melbourne FL 32940

Dept: History

Re: Use of Human subjects in Research

Project entitled: Building a Florida Legacy: World War II through the Space Age in Brevard County

The forms that you submitted to this office in regard to the use of human subjects in the proposal referenced above have been reviewed by the Secretary, the Chair, and two members of the Human Subjects Committee. Your project is determined to be exempt per 45 CFR § 46.101(b)2 and has been approved by an accelerated review process.

The Human Subjects Committee has not evaluated your proposal for scientific merit, except to weigh the risk to the human participants and the aspects of the proposal related to potential risk and benefit. This approval does not replace any departmental or other approvals which may be required.

If the project has not been completed by August 11, 2003 you must request renewed approval for continuation of the project.

You are advised that any change in protocol in this project must be approved by resubmission of the project to the Committee for approval. Also, the principal investigator must promptly report, in writing, any unexpected problems causing risks to research subjects or others.

By copy of this memorandum, the chairman of your department and/or your major professor is reminded that he/she is responsible for being informed concerning research projects involving human subjects in the department, and should review protocols of such investigations as often as needed to insure that the project is being conducted in compliance with our institution and with DHHS regulations.

This institution has an Assurance on file with the Office for Protection from Research Risks. The Assurance Number is M1339.

cc: Dr James P Jones
APPLICATION NO. 02.357

APPENDIX B, PERMISSION LETTER

Release Transcript and Audio Recording

I, _____, knowingly and voluntarily permit Melissa W. Euziere, the full use of the information contained in the transcript and audio recordings of this oral history interview for whatever scholarly, educational purposes that may be determined including the thesis project, Building a Florida Legacy. This project is being conducted to fulfill the requirements for a Master of Arts in History from Florida State University and will trace the development of Brevard County with regards to the establishment of Naval Air Station, Banana River before, during, and after World War II.

Each interview will be audio taped to record the responses and then transcribed. The tapes will be held by Melissa W. Euziere until the completion of her thesis project and will then be donated to the **Reichelt Program for Oral History** at Florida State University who will house the tapes as part of their mission to preserve history through oral history.

The transcript may be used by qualified scholars in such places as are made available for purposes of research by the **Reichelt Program for Oral History** with the understanding it will be *cited or quoted only with proper attribution*.

No reproduction of this transcript, other than for purposes of use by qualified scholars [as determined by the Reichelt Program for Oral History], shall be made except with my written permission.

The audio tape may be heard, cited, or quoted *only with my express written permission*, by such persons that I deem qualified scholars and in such places as are made available for purposes of research by the **Reichelt Program for Oral History**.

I understand that I retain permission to reproduce, publish, broadcast, transmit, perform or adapt this transcript and audio recording of my voice for my own purposes.

Signature of Interviewee

Date of Interview

Signature of Interviewer
Contact Information - 321-259-9883

Florida State University Institutional Review Board
2035 E. Paul Dirac Drive Box 15
100 Sliger Bldg., Innovation Park
Tallahassee, FL 32310
850-644-7900



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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Melissa Williford Euziere was born in Orlando, Florida on May 2, 1978. She grew up in Melbourne, Florida. She attended Stetson University in DeLand, Florida and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in history and political science in May of 2000. From Stetson University, she advanced on to Florida State University where she worked at the Institute on World War II and the Human Experience while working on her Masters of Arts in history. After completing her course work at Florida State University, she accepted a teaching position at Holy Trinity Episcopal Academy in Melbourne, Florida where she teaches high school American history and American government.