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Central Florida home to POW camps, army training facilities

Published: Sunday, February 12, 2012
Gerbasi, Chris
 LEESBURG
 CHRIS GERBASI | Staff Writer
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Seventy years ago, a place known as the Orange Home Tent Camp was built on 2,200 acres near Lake Deaton, about halfway between Leesburg and Wildwood in Sumter County.

Today, the area is the home of the Continental Country Club, near county roads 44 and 468, and the camp is largely forgotten.

But the the Army Corps of Engineers has not forgotten about the site, later known as the Leesburg Air Service Center. The center was a satellite training facility of the Army Air Forces School of Applied Tactics, based in Orlando, from 1943 through 1945.

The Corps' Jacksonville district is conducting an environmental investigation of the property because of the use of munitions there, as it does at numerous former military installations. Lake and Sumter counties were home to many military camps and airfields during the war.

"There are several hundred sites like this within Florida," Corps project manager William Spence said. "Florida was a big training area for the Army and Navy for World War II. There were a lot of bombing ranges, bombing targets, gunnery ranges."

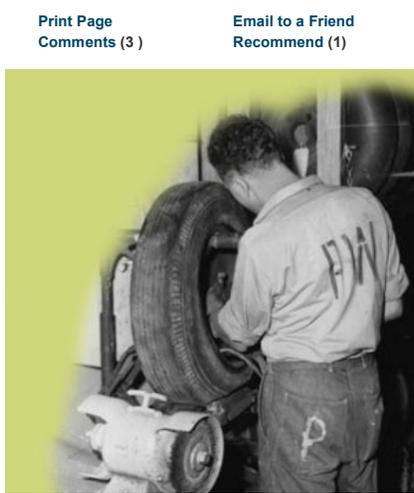
The Corps has searched historical records, blueprints, aerial photos and other documents to learn about the air service center, and is seeking additional information from the public.

"Sometimes we get older folks who have some information we don't have," Spence said. "We use any information we can find, any information from somebody who was stationed there before, or maybe their dad served in the Army at the time."

Spence hasn't heard from anyone. But there is at least one veteran in the area who remembers the Orange Home.

Nick Castelli, 95, was stationed there, repairing and rebuilding military aircraft. Originally from West Virginia, Castelli said he enjoyed Leesburg folks so much that he married a Leesburg girl, and after the war opened a body shop with another member of his outfit, C.A. Burleson. B&C Body & Paint Shop has been at the corner of Magnolia and Canal streets for 65 years, and Castelli still drops in regularly.

Castelli was a staff sergeant with the 91st Air Service Group from 1942 to 1945. After Leesburg, the group was moved in 1944 to Georgia, Oklahoma City and Saipan Island in the Pacific.



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Castelli said he could not go overseas because of a heart condition. The service had actually rejected him because of the condition, but he talked his way into the Air Service Group because it needed sheet metal workers and he had gone to trade school.

While based at the Orange Home, the 91st group served 13 airports, traveling to each one whenever called upon.

"Anything that was wrecked, we'd rebuild," Castelli said.

Castelli lived in one of the 1,125 tents at the camp, which initially had only wash basins for soldiers to use. He said the owner of a Leesburg hotel always left one room unoccupied so soldiers could use the shower and towels.

The Army Air Forces school acquired the land near Wildwood and built the camp in 1942-43, according to a Corps report. The property remained under military control until March 1945, when it was no longer required for the war effort.

Spence said the air service center had a rifle range, small-arms range and hand-grenade court, where soldiers practiced throwing grenades. This site, however, used live high-explosive hand grenades, which would obviously pose a threat today if any remain intact.

"Kind of dangerous training," Spence said.

Castelli, however, does not recall the camp having a hand-grenade court. And his group was too focused on rebuilding aircraft to get much training on the gun ranges, he said.

Castelli's group serviced Leesburg Army Airfield, now Leesburg International Airport. The 313th Fighter Squadron was assigned to the airfield, training pilots with P-40 Warhawks and P-47 Thunderbolts.

Castelli recalls repairing a C-47 at a shop near the airfield one day. He saw a P-47 fly overhead and the engine exploded and a "ball of fire came out." The pilot couldn't escape, and the plane crashed into Silver Lake, Castelli said.

Many years later, the Leesburg library referred a woman looking for information about the airfield to Castelli. The woman's father had died when she was 3. Her father turned out to be the pilot in the crash that Castelli had witnessed. He told her the story of what happened that day.

"When she was leaving Leesburg, going to the Orlando airport, out of the clear blue sky a rainbow came out," Castelli recalled the woman telling him. "She said, 'I knew it was my dad.'"

Castelli also remembers the time when a group of engineers -- "They were a tough bunch of guys" -- wanted to see how fast they could construct a runway. They cleared land and put down sheet metal runway mats.

"Those damn engineers had the land cleared and a P-40 or P-47 landed in 36 hours," he said.

Castelli is not certain but believes that site was at the Bushnell Army Airfield, which was also was part of the Army Air Force Training Command during 1942-1945. That airfield site is northeast of Route 301 and Walker Avenue, one mile northeast of Bushnell, and was constructed by the 841st Aviation Engineers Battalion in 1943, according to military-related websites.

Bushnell airfield had a hard-surface runway and a steel plank landing mat runway. Castelli said that after the war, the steel mats from the runway the engineers had put in were made into fences around the area. Today, the outlines of the former runways are still apparent in aerial photos.

Bushnell AAF was also used by Boeing B-17s from Brooksville AAF. Castelli said his group once had a secretive mission to repair five B-17s that had sustained damage after flying through a flock of birds. The Brooksville base was shut down during repairs on the B-17s, which were well-guarded because they had innovative remote-control bombing systems.

Bushnell AAF was used extensively in chemical warfare tests in nearby Withlacoochee state forest, according to an Army Corps of Engineers report. Bushnell also included a 40-acre designated ordnance area.

In 1943, the Dugway Proving Ground Mobile Chemical Warfare Service Unit arrived to begin experiments on chemical agents, setting up the Chemical Warfare Service Experimental Station. Chemical munitions were stored at the airfield, and there was a toxic gas yard. Aerial bomb drops on the Withlacoochee test site were from planes that were loaded at Bushnell. Chemical plant growth regulators and DDT insecticide were also used at Bushnell, the Corps report said.

Those activities caused the former airfield to be the site of environmental cleanup investigations in 2001.

Not far from the Leesburg airport on U.S. Highway 441, the grounds of the current site of Lake-Sumter Community College were used as a camp to house German prisoners during WWII. There were 12 to 14 barracks that had to be removed from the site before the college could begin construction in 1964, LSCC's first president, Paul Williams, recently told The Daily Commercial.

The camp was originally part of the Leesburg air base. It was a branch camp for Camp Blanding in Starke which housed 10,000 POWs, according to Daily Commercial archives. The Leesburg camp held 250 prisoners. Many of the prisoners had been part of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's elite fighting unit, which had been captured in North Africa.

Apparently, the prisoners' preferred movie fare were musicals, action films and historical films. They also enjoyed sports equipment and playing soccer on an athletic field, home study courses and a library, steak dinners, and they formed a chorus.

Castelli said he was not in Leesburg when the POWs were there, but his father-in-law told him, "the German prisoners were happier than a lark."

But the POWs were also put to work, picking fruit and vegetables, and working for construction firms. Businesses paid the government for their services.

After the war, the barracks were used as housing for agricultural workers until 1962, when the site was selected for the college campus.

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Castelli said there may be one or two other veterans of the Orange Home still in the area. Inquiries with the local VFW and the Korean War Veterans Association found few veterans who had even heard of the site, and none who were stationed in the area then.

An Army Corps inspection of the Orange Home site in August 2011 found no explosive material, and soil sample results were good, Spence said. However, because of the use of high-explosive hand grenades, the Army Corps is recommending deeper soil inspections of the hand grenade court to determine whether any materials are leaching into the ground water.

Spence met with state, Wildwood and Sumter officials to discuss those plans. But with lengthy reviews and planning due, he said it could be years before the Corps conducts the field work at the former Orange Home Tent Camp.

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YOUR VOICE
comments from our readers

Orange home (by: *Cody Jones, jonescody@rocketmail.com*, Leesburg fl - 2/13/2012)

My grandfather served with the 91st air service group at Orange home. He married my grandmother while stationed there she was from Wildwood. After his tour in Saipan he returned to Leesburg and lived the rest of his life. If anyone has more info about Orange home I would love to see it

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Orange Home WWII camp (by: *Danny Gail McElrath, Tallahassee, Florida* - 2/13/2012)

I was born and grew up in Wildwood, and I remember well the camp at Orange Home. I have scoured the internet in vain trying to find something about it and am very glad to see this article. One thing I recall is that soldiers would sit by the gate on 44 and anyone driving by would stop to give them a ride to Leesburg or wherever. But I have a memory of some POWs being temporarily at this camp. It must have been at the end or right after the end for it was when civilians were allowed to ride through part of the camp as we did one Sunday afternoon. I can see in my mind the tent quarters and a green wooden building that I believe was a movie theatre. I remember the rifle range which could be seen from 44. The remains of it were visible for many years after the war.

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91st service article (by: *R. J. Brice* - 2/12/2012)

I live in Continental Country Club . Are there any photographs of the 91st orange home camp or encampment location maps ???

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