

COLUMN: Do you want to know more about Punta Gorda's airfield?

Apr 15, 2020

Good day to all! This is a column I wrote on the Punta Gorda Army Airfield before receiving Gussie Baker's information. I hope it complements her recollections. Did you know the Punta Gorda Airport had its beginning as an army airfield?

Early in World War II, Florida Sen. Claude Pepper announced plans to construct a training facility on just over 1,700 acres of land a few miles east of the county stockade at Carmalita and Florida Streets. It would become one of 40 facilities operating in Florida during the war due to the state's wide-open spaces and practically year-round flying climate. The stockade building, with its barred windows, still stands today, adjacent to the horse arena.

After much planning, construction began in early 1943 and included a three-mile asphalt access road. When completed in January 1944 there were three asphalt runways, each 5,000 feet long and 150 feet wide in a triangular configuration, 61 service buildings (hangars, repair shops, mess halls, etc.), 268 hutments with wooden floors, sides, and canvas roofs, and a 20-foot-high control tower.

Interestingly, the first plane to land at the airfield, in February 1943, did so mistakenly. It was a Bell P-39 Airacobra and the pilot, out of Page Field in Fort Myers. The pilot became disoriented during a night training

mission, landing on what he thought was a concrete roadway, but was actually a barely graded runway!

Military personnel began arriving in mid-November 1943 and by the airfield's formal dedication, March 19, 1944, over 1,100 officers and enlisted men had arrived to support an average of 200 pilots in each training group. Pilots were assigned to one of two squadrons, the 502nd Fighter-bomber and 490th Fighter. Maj. Forrest H. Munger was the first commanding officer. Since the Punta Gorda and Sarasota airfields were considered "branches" of Venice's, Munger reported directly to that base's commander, Col. V.B. Dixon. The 27th Service Corps Detachment from Venice Airfield was in charge of base operations.

When you consider many of the servicemen were accompanied by families, one can easily imagine the change it brought to a county with a population of just under 3,700 folks only two years earlier. In fact, Punta Gorda's city council appointed a Fair Rents Committee to handle complaints of rent gouging. Two of the five members were my granddad, Frank Rigell and county attorney, Earl Farr. And I'll bet the small town's young ladies enjoyed all the newfound attention they likely received.

A United Service Organization (USO) center was established at the Punta Gorda Woman's Club on Sullivan Street and world heavyweight boxing champion Max Baer was part of its first show in January 1944. The non-commissioned officer's club was on Marion Avenue in today's Ace Hardware building, while Page Apartments at Charlotte Street and Mark Avenue in Solana served as Bachelor Officers' Quarters.

Early aircraft were various trainers and the Curtis P-40 Warhawk of Flying Tigers' fame, later replaced by the North American P-51 Mustang, the Air Corps' front-line fighter, in the fall of 1944. Bombing and strafing exercises were conducted on a remote area of today's Babcock-Webb Wildlife Management Area, with aerial gunnery over the Gulf of Mexico. The basic structure of the EAA's (Experimental Aircraft Association) building at the airport's southeastern corner today, was the airfield's

three-sided, open concrete bunker used to sight aircraft guns. The airfield also “hosted” about 500 transient aircraft each month.

World War II ended on Aug. 15, 1945 with victory over Japan and the airfield was placed on inactive status Sept. 1, 1945. Its last commanding officer, Lt. Col. R.A. Hanes, declared the field “surplus” in November 1945. Recently arrived German prisoners-of-war then helped dismantle base facilities and equipment. The airfield was turned over to the county in April 1947, although a reversion clause for reactivation remained in effect until late 1969, after which the county deeded the airport to the then Charlotte County Development Authority.

During approximately 22 months of operation, the Punta Gorda Army Airfield trained around 800 pilots crucial to the war effort. Unfortunately, there were seven fatal crashes during those months involving pilots stationed at the airfield.

Flight Officer Edward B. Harrison lost his life on March 9, 1944 due to engine failure during a bombing exercise. Capt. Dorrance C. Zabriskie was killed during a dive-bombing exercise March 31 and 2nd Lt. Harris L. Kimble died in a crash during a routine flight May 26, only 19 years old. The wreckage was found on sand flats six miles west of the field.

A fourth pilot, Lt. Donald R. Smith, was presumed dead after a 7-day search, when the mail plane he was piloting went missing on its return trip from Drew Field in Tampa, Aug. 7. Lt. Robert M. Day was killed Aug. 14 in a mid-air collision during a high-altitude gunnery mission. The other pilot, Lt. Harold E. Hanson, though injured, survived. Capt. Robert R. Sherbondy, a decorated combat veteran, died March 7, 1945, on a routine training flight west of Egmont Key while on temporary duty at Pinellas Army Airfield, and Theodore F. Vander-Heuval died after bailing out of his plane over Fort Ogden Field in July when the engine failed.

Visit Charlotte County History Collections and the Punta Gorda History Center’s Collections “online” to view more photographs of the Punta Gorda Army Airfield. Also, the Mural Society is raising funds for a mural

at Veterans Park depicting the airfield and you can view an exhibit on the airfield in the Cigar Cottage at the Punta Gorda History Park.

“Did You Know” appears, typically, every other Wednesday, courtesy of this newspaper and the Charlotte County Historical Center Society. The Society’s mission is to help promote and preserve Charlotte County’s rich history. A family membership is only \$35 and provides complimentary access to over 300 museums and technical centers nationwide. We are also always looking for volunteers and interested individuals to serve as board members. If you believe our area’s history is as important as we do, please visit [\[countyfl.gov/services/historical/\]\(http://countyfl.gov/services/historical/\), or call 941-613-3228 for more information. Visit the same site to find out what history related programs are offered.*](http://www.charlotte</i></p></div><div data-bbox=)*

https://www.yoursun.com/charlotte/news/column-do-you-want-to-know-more-about-punta-gordas-airfield/article_5554f53a-7e61-11ea-b193-6799a095f661.html

From: [Wood](#)
To: [Gusie Baker](#)
Subject: People would love to hear about the history of PGD
Date: Wednesday, April 15, 2008 8:12:46 PM

Letting the public know the history of PGD will help the airport regain it's lost revenue.

Pass it on.....

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An airman sits on the wing of a Curtis P-40 Warhawk fighter plane at the Punta Gorda Army Airfield. After it was developed, the North American P-51 Mustang replaced the older P-40s and became one of the most legendary planes of World War II.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY GUSIE BAKER



A group of pilots pose with a trainer during their stay at Punta Gorda Airfield during World War II.

Photo provided by Gusie Baker



PHOTO PROVIDED BY JOHN MAGNIN One of the panels of "Historic Punta Gorda Airfield," painted by Edwin Yip, illustrates its history as a training field for the P-51 fighter that proved so vital in winning World War II. After the war, the field was turned into a general aviation facility that has hosted many unusual aircraft during the annual Florida International Air Show. Both murals were destroyed by Hurricane Charley, and the society has been unable to reach an agreement with the Airport Authority to replace them.