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“HELL-BY-THE-SEA”:  
FLORIDA’S CAMP GORDON JOHNSTON  
IN WORLD WAR II

by DAVID J. COLES

**W**ORLD War II was a profoundly transforming experience in the development of the South and the state of Florida. As historian George Tindall has noted of the region, “To a greater degree than the previous war it put people on the move: to ship-yards, war plants, training camps, and far-flung battlefields.” Military facilities costing more than four billion dollars came into being throughout the South, and Florida shared fully in this expansion. The war also brought increased prosperity to both rural and urban areas and hastened the demands of black residents for greater political and economic opportunities.<sup>1</sup>

Although scholars have long recognized the importance of these general developments, very little is known about how they precisely came about. More specifically, the many ways in which local communities were forced to adapt to changing conditions brought about by the war remain imperfectly understood. In terms of the military build-up in Florida, for example, the state served as the temporary home of nearly 200 installations during the war. Some were tiny, remote airfields used only for emergency landings, but others were major bases providing training and housing for tens of thousands of soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen. An examination of the creation, growth, and demise of one

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1. George Brown Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945* (Baton Rouge, 1967), 694-95.

[1]



Aerial view of Camp Gordon Johnston, troop unit 1 at Lanark, 1943. *Photograph courtesy Florida Photographic Collection, Florida State Archives.*

of these posts, Camp Gordon Johnston, provides insight into the larger dynamics surrounding these significant processes.<sup>2</sup>

One of the state's most important military facilities, Camp Gordon Johnston probably constituted Florida's second largest installation in terms of physical size and the number of troops trained; moreover, it received a high level of notoriety during the war years for its crude living conditions and its dangerous training programs. Columnist Walter Winchell allegedly referred to the post as the "Alcatraz of the Army," where even the post chaplains went absent without leave. One soldier stationed there simply

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2. Charlton Tebeau, *A History of Florida* (Coral Gables, 1971), 416-21, provides an overview of Florida's role in World War II, although a study by Gary Mormino, which is currently in progress, promises to be the standard work. See also David Ramsey, "Military Installations in Florida During World War II" (unpublished typescript, Florida Collection, State Library of Florida, Tallahassee), 1-16; and no author, "Military Set-up Florida" (unpublished typescript, Florida Collection), 1-8.

addressed his letters "Hell-By-The-Sea, Carrabelle, Florida." Today the camp's remains are largely ignored, with only a few of its hastily constructed buildings still standing in the small panhandle villages of St. Teresa, Lanark, and Carrabelle.<sup>3</sup>

In 1940, before American entry into World War II, only eight military installations existed in Florida. The armed forces expansion that had begun in 1940 and early 1941 with the partial mobilization of the National Guard and implementation of the nation's first peacetime draft had little affected the state. The Pearl Harbor attack, however, forced military planners to implement the organizing and training of the largest combat force in American history. Across the country workmen expanded existing military bases and constructed and occupied huge new installations within the period of a few months.

Many of these facilities were located in sparsely populated areas of the South. The geographical and climatological advantages of training in Florida appeared obvious, and the peninsula was strategically located for the defense of the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico ports. Consequently, between 1941 and 1945 new installations proliferated throughout the state.<sup>4</sup>

Notwithstanding the large military build-up, the northern Gulf coast of the Florida panhandle did not immediately attract the interest of army or navy administrators. Pensacola had long been home to a major naval base, and Jimmy Doolittle and his Army Air Corps squadron used nearby Eglin Airfield in preparation for their 1942 attack on Japan. Planners gave little thought to the coast between Tampa and Panama City as an area for facilities. During the war's early days a small airfield was located two miles to the west of Carrabelle, a sleepy fishing village southwest of Talla-

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3. *Tallahassee Democrat*, August 15, 1980, May 26, 1985. No article or book-length history of Camp Gordon Johnston has been published. Several unpublished studies, including Gerald A. Butterfield, "Camp Gordon Johnston, Franklin County, and World War II" (unpublished typescript, Florida Collection); and Tim Few, "The Training of the Third Engineer Amphibian Brigade at Camp Gordon Johnston During World War II" (unpublished paper, Florida Collection) are available.

4. Geoffrey Perret, *There's a War To Be Won: The United States Army in World War II* (New York, 1991), 63-125. See also John Morton Blum, *V was for Victory: Politics and American Culture During World War II* (New York, 1976); A. Russell Buchanan, *The United States and World War II*, 2 vols. (New York, 1964); Ramsey, "Military Installations," 1; Kathryn Abbey, "Florida, The Index Finger," (unpublished typescript, Florida Collection), 5-9.

hassee. Known officially as the Carrabelle Flight Strip, it served as an auxiliary landing site for the state capital's Dale Mabry Airfield. Other than this small intrusion, the coast between Apalachicola and St. Marks had by the spring of 1942 felt little of the impact of war.

This situation changed dramatically when military officials selected the area for a major amphibious training base to cover twenty miles of the coast and include more than 100,000 acres of training area. The impact on small towns such as Carrabelle, with a 1940 population of barely 1,000, proved enormous. Even Tallahassee, sixty miles away, soon felt the shock of several thousand boisterous GIs looking for entertainment on Saturday nights. Although civil-military relations remained generally good, later in the war there were a number of disturbances in the capital involving servicemen. Crime, including prostitution and its accompanying venereal disease, also climbed during the period. The war had come to north Florida.<sup>5</sup>

The Amphibious Training Center (ATC) originated out of a disagreement between the army and navy over amphibious training methods. Prior to the United States's entry into the war, large-scale amphibious operations had not been officially anticipated. The nation's strategic situation at the outbreak of war, however, convinced military planners "that landings on a large scale would have to be planned and executed in order to defeat the enemy."<sup>6</sup>

The United States military possessed two amphibious corps at the outbreak of the war, one serving with the Pacific Fleet and the other with the Atlantic Fleet. At this time the corps consisted of both army and marine units commanded by the navy. Army officials opposed this system as unwieldy and were skeptical of the navy's ability to train adequately the large number of army divi-

5. Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940. Population, Volume II* (Washington, 1943), 45, 64, 96, 118-20; Mary Louise Ellis and William Warren Rogers, *Favored Land: A History of Tallahassee and Leon County* (Norfolk, VA, 1988), 144-64; Ramsey, "Military Installations," 4; no author, "Florida Military Set-Up," 1. Although no detailed figures have been located concerning the prevalence of venereal disease, as late as January 1946 the Camp Gordon Johnston newspaper claimed that the rate had increased 100 percent. See Camp Carrabelle and Camp Gordon Johnston Amphibian, January 21, 1946 (hereinafter, *Amphibian*; available on microfilm, Robert Manning Stozier Library, Florida State University).

6. Marshall O. Becker, *The Amphibious Training Center: Study No. 22, Army Ground Forces* (Washington, 1946), 1.

sions then being organized. These divisions, which were destined for service in the Pacific and European theaters, required familiarization with amphibious tactics.<sup>7</sup>

An April 1942 report for Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall ominously declared that the "planning, preparation, and training for amphibious operations up to that time had been so deficient that a real operation against a competent enemy could end only in disaster for American forces." The report stressed that "only the Army had both the means and the grasp of the problem to plan, prepare, and train the necessary ground and air forces for joint amphibious operations on the scale envisaged." The author recommended that the army "be charged with the planning, preparation, and training for large-scale amphibious operations; and that the Navy and the Marine Corps assist the Army only in procurement of the necessary shipping, landing craft, and special equipment, and with . . . technical advice and cooperation."<sup>8</sup>

The navy, already thinly stretched in early 1942 as a result of losses in the Pacific and its obligations to defend Atlantic shipping lanes, accepted this doctrinal change. Accordingly, in May 1942 the War Department established an Amphibious Training Center to be administered by the Army Ground Forces Command. The plan provided for training eleven infantry divisions and one armored division. Camp Edwards, Massachusetts, was designated as the center's original site, and four divisions were to be trained there. The War Department then planned to move the ATC to Carrabelle, where six divisions would receive training, and ultimately to Fort Lewis, Washington, as the site for the final two divisions.<sup>9</sup>

Policy and doctrinal changes later significantly reduced the number of divisions that passed through the ATC. Its original mission included training in both shore-to-shore and ship-to-shore amphibious operations, but the army eventually returned the latter to the navy's jurisdiction and concentrated only on shore-to-shore training. In army jargon this meant the development of doctrine and training of "all phases of the operations of Army units involved in embarking troops and equipment in small boats from the land, the approach to and landing on a hostile beach, the

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7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid., 1-3.

establishment of a beachhead, and the preparation and initiation of an attack inland.<sup>10</sup>

An Army Ground Forces site board examined several proposed training sites in Virginia, as well as the Everglades and Venice, Florida, before selecting Carrabelle as the ATC's second home. Its members looked for locations with the following characteristics: an island approximately ten miles offshore, a large sheltered body of water near a convenient bivouac area, a coastal area about twenty miles long with a number of one-mile landing beaches, and eight to ten miles of land suitable for training purposes inland from the coast. The official history of the ATC noted that, although "none of the sites visited possessed all of the features desired . . . the board felt that Carrabelle approached most nearly the basic requirements."<sup>11</sup> Brigadier General Frank Keating, who commanded the ATC throughout its history, opposed the Carrabelle site because of the "undesirable nature of the beaches and maneuver areas," and the surgeon general felt that the site was unhealthy. Nonetheless, the board approved the Florida site, "chiefly because no others appeared to be available and the urgent need for expediting amphibious training . . . outweighed sanitary considerations and the lack of certain desired features."<sup>12</sup>

The Amphibious Training Center began operating on Cape Cod's Camp Edwards in June 1942. The War Department planned to use the Massachusetts site as a stopgap until construction of facilities were completed at Carrabelle, which it considered the center's primary home. The staff and cadre had only a few weeks to prepare for the arrival of the first training unit, the Forty-fifth Infantry Division. Between July and October 1942 both the Forty-fifth and the Thirty-sixth Infantry divisions received amphibious training at the camp.<sup>13</sup>

While the ATC operated at Camp Edwards, army engineers supervised construction at Carrabelle. Once the site had been selected, the government moved quickly to purchase or lease the required land. Eventually, agents purchased about 10,000 acres directly from landowners, while 155,000 acres were leased, mainly

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10. *Ibid.*, 2-3; William F. Heavey, *Down Ramp!: The Story of the Army Amphibian Engineers* (Washington, 1947), 1-9.

11. Becker, *Amphibious Training Center*, 9.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, 7-12; Heavey, *Down Ramp!*, 10-15.

from the St. Joe Paper Company. According to one source, government surveyors "boast[ed] of a world's record in mapping the reservation. Working under veritable jungle conditions, the area was surveyed in 21 days."<sup>14</sup> Contracts were then quickly let for constructing the thousands of buildings required. Site clearing began on July 8, 1942, and actual construction commenced two weeks later. Initial contracts were completed in sixty days at a cost of about \$10,000,000.<sup>15</sup>

Once finished, the camp stretched for some twenty miles along the Gulf coast between St. George Island, Carrabelle, and Alligator Point. It included the villages of Lanark and St. Teresa. Four separate camps actually comprised the complex— three for the regimental combat teams which made up the bulk of each division passing through training and a fourth for the post headquarters, ATC headquarters, and support facilities. Prior to construction of a permanent building, the Lanark Hotel served as post headquarters. On the camp's eastern boundary, pilots used Alligator Point as an aerial gunnery area, and to the west Dog and St. George islands were used to stage amphibious landings and airborne drops. A soldier later commented that because of the dozens of exercises that took place there, Dog Island was "the most 'fought over' piece of land in Florida."<sup>16</sup> Additional training areas occupied most of the interior lands north to the Crooked and Ochlockonee rivers.

The first troops arrived at Carrabelle on September 10, 1942. They consisted of support units, such as headquarters, quartermaster, military police, and medical corps detachments. Amphibious Command training units came the following month. The Florida site originally was known simply as Camp Carrabelle, but in January 1943 it officially became Camp Gordon Johnston. Although today he is as little known as the installation that once bore his name, Colonel Gordon Johnston was a distinguished cavalry officer of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. He earned a Medal of Honor while serving during the Philippine Insurrection and later fought in France with the Allied Expedi-

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14. *Amphibian*, June 5, 1943; Captain James E. Davis, "They Went from Here," *Florida Highways* 12 (September 1944), 12, 23, 24.

15. *Amphibian*, September 10, 1943.

16. *Ibid.*

tionary Force during World War I. Johnston died in a 1934 polo accident.<sup>17</sup>

Particularly in the camp's early weeks, living conditions were extraordinarily crude. Virtually all of the buildings were built only of light wood. Many of the barracks were prefabricated, had no floors, and few contained indoor latrines. Ironically, some of the soldiers suffered from the cold. The winter of 1942-1943 proved severe, and the barracks lacked adequate heating. The army did not build mess halls for some time, requiring troops to eat outside with mess kits for several months. A permanent chapel was not completed until a month after the men arrived, and no recreation center existed for several months.<sup>18</sup>

One camp amenity existed from the earliest days. A newspaper, originally untitled but known later as the *Amphibian*, appeared on October 16, 1942. The first issue included a poem by Sergeant Bill Roth which satirized the camp's poor conditions. Entitled *Hell in Camp Carrabelle*, it opined:

The rattlesnake bites you, the horsefly stings,  
The mosquito delights you with his buzzin wings.  
Sand burrs cause you to jig and dance  
And those who sit down get ants in their pants.

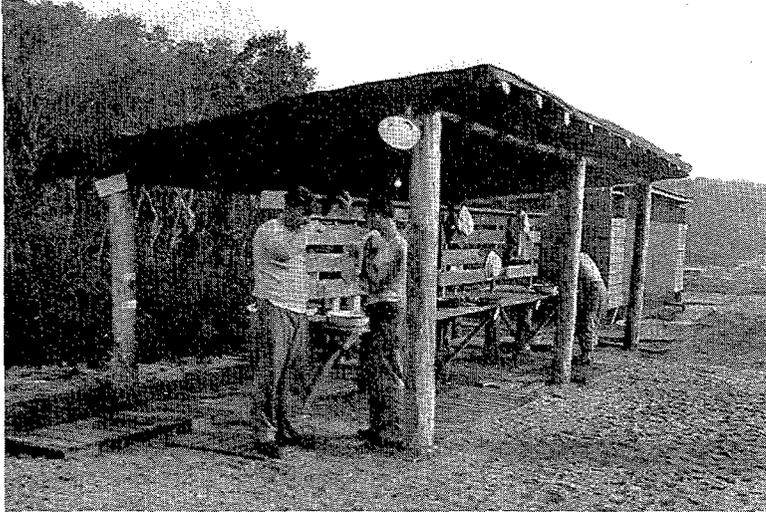
The heat in the summer is one hundred and ten  
Too hot for the Devil, too hot for the men.  
Come see for yourself and you can tell  
Its a helluva place, this Carrabelle.<sup>19</sup>

Post conditions shocked many new arrivals. When troops of the Second Engineer Special Brigade learned that they were leaving Camp Edwards for Florida, according to the unit historian, "Everyone envisioned palm trees swaying back and forth in the

17. Francis B. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army*, 2 vols. (Washington, 1903), I, 578; *Amphibian*, May 1, 1943; *Who Was Who in America* (Chicago, 1942), I, 643.

18. *Tallahassee Democrat*, August 15, 1980, May 26, 1985; *Amphibian*, November 6, December 11, 1942, January 30, June 5, September 10, 1943; Interview of Howard J. Friedman by Virginia Perkins, December 16, 1975, M77-164, Junior League of Tallahassee, Oral Histories, 1976-1977, Florida State Archives.

19. Unnamed Camp Carrabelle newspaper, October 16, 1942, available on microfilm with the *Amphibian*.



Soldiers at a wash-up shed, Camp Gordon Johnston, C. 1944. Photograph courtesy Florida Photographic collection, Florida State Archives.

cool gulf breezes and the prospect of a warm winter in Florida, the millionaires [sic] paradise.” He added, “What a surprise was in store for them!”<sup>20</sup> The men of the 533rd Engineer Boat and Shore Regiment had similar thoughts. “It seemed that the unit was being unusually well taken care of— Cape Cod in the summer and Florida in the winter— and there was some doubt as to whether [General] Sherman was right [about war being hell],” began one soldier’s account.<sup>21</sup> After traveling by rail and boat to Florida, the amphibians’ optimism about their new duty station quickly evaporated. Instead, they found that “Carrabelle did have palm trees and cool breezes (at times), but it also had rain, mud, swamps, lizards, chiggers, snakes, wild hogs, deer, flies, mosquitoes, sand fleas— and wilderness. The cantonment-type camp we had been told to expect was almost nonexistent. The following weeks can best be described in one word— rough. The job of setting up a new camp in this wilderness was no picnic. . . . At Carrabelle everyone

20. *Put 'Em Across: A History of the 2D Engineer Special Brigade, 1942-1945* (Harrisburg, PA, 1946; reprint ed., Fort Belvoir, VA, 1988), 19.

21. *Surf and Sand: The Saga of the 533d Engineer Boat and Shore Regiment and 1461st Engineer Maintenance Company, 1942-1945* (Andover, MA, 1947), 19.

pitched in to help build roads, barracks, latrines and mess halls until the camp was fairly well established and 'normal' life could be resumed and training started on the shallow beaches and sandy reefs of the Gulf of Mexico.<sup>22</sup>

The lack of nearby recreational facilities provided another source of irritation for the troops. Only Tallahassee, with its restaurants, theaters, and— probably most importantly— Florida State College for Women and Florida A&M College, seemed an attractive location for visiting soldiers. But the town lay sixty miles away in a county where alcoholic beverages were not sold legally, and its entertainment facilities were inadequate for such large numbers of GIs. The troops also complained that airmen and soldiers from Dale Mabry Field just outside Tallahassee were able to fill all the best hotels and restaurants long before soldiers from Camp Gordon Johnston arrived. Before war's end the natural rivalry between men stationed at the two bases turned violent.<sup>23</sup>

Passes and leave proved an infrequent luxury in any event, so soldiers often had to be content with on-base USO-sponsored dances, shows at the post theater, reading in the post library, and fishing from Carrabelle piers. The few soldiers with an opportunity to visit the surrounding small towns were appalled at the region's backwardness. One recalled: "Those northerners . . . who had thought of Florida as a state completely filled with resorts, recreation, and bathing beauties suffered a rude disappointment. The nearest town, Carrabelle, was dismal proof that *Tobacco Road* was not a figment of its author's imagination. To the north one passed through Sopchoppy and other towns made up of a few shacks and a swarm of hogs, until Tallahassee was reached. . . . There was a highway which ran in front of the camp, connecting Apalachicola to the west with Tallahassee. The traffic was light and bus service was, for all practical purposes, non-existent. It was soon obvious that the Florida Board of Commerce would not be flattered to hear the opinion of the newest residents of its northwest section."<sup>24</sup>

If conditions at the camp shocked troops stationed there, local residents also had to condition themselves to the sight of thousands of soldiers crowding the area's small towns. By 1943 Carra-

22. *Put 'Em Across*, 19.

23. Ellis and Rogers, *Favored Land*, 144-64; *Put 'Em Across*, 19; Interview of Howard J. Friedman.

24. *Surf and Sand*, 20.

belle's population had more than doubled, as many soldiers brought families with them. Mary Butera, then president of the USO in nearby Sopchoppy, recalled the many soldiers' wives that stayed with local families because of a lack of base housing. New groups of temporary residents came and went as units rotated through the camp. Relations between soldiers and local citizens remained generally good, although Butera remembered that many servicemen attempted to take advantage of Florida's liberal divorce laws to end wartime marriages.<sup>25</sup>

Another civilian, Tom Wineman, also had vivid memories of Camp Gordon Johnston during this period. Then twelve years old, he came to the camp with his father, a civilian contractor building officers' quarters near Lanark. Remembering it as a "God forsaken[,] tick and snake infested wilderness," Wineman recalled that living conditions for civilian workers and their families were the same as those for soldiers— crude barracks made of wood and tar paper. Base security was surprisingly lax, but when the youngster took a picture of a Sherman tank and sent his film to the post exchange to be developed, it was confiscated by censors.<sup>26</sup>

By mid-October 1942 all of the ATC's support and training elements had reached Carrabelle. With the first student unit scheduled to arrive within a month, the cadre had to complete the basic facilities and, at the same time, prepare to train about 20,000 men. Over the next several weeks troops constructed extensive training aids required for the course, including large cargo net towers for disembarkation procedures, mock-ups and outlines of landing craft used for on shore preliminary training, and numerous obstacle and infiltration courses. The abandoned lumber town of Harbeson City was transformed into a German village known as "Shickelgruber Haven" for use in perfecting street-fighting techniques. The troops also cleared training areas, conducted rehearsals, prepared schedules, and received refresher courses. "The new location on the swampy shores of the Gulf Coast of Florida was certainly not an inspiring sight," recorded the official ATC historian. "Construction was not completed, and fifty yards from the fringe

25. Telephone interview with Mary Butera, Sopchoppy, FL, April 10, 1994, notes in author's possession; *Apalachicola Times*, March 5, 1943.

26. Tom Wineman to Leland Hawes, October 26, 1993, photocopy in author's possession; telephone interview with Tom Wineman, Largo, FL, April 9, 1994, notes in author's possession.

of the camp the casual wanderer found himself in a swampy, tangled, and snake-infested subtropical jungle." Nonetheless, the cadre managed to have the camp at least partially ready for trainees when they arrived in November.<sup>27</sup>

The first unit to pass through the ATC at Carrabelle was the Thirty-eighth Infantry Division. From November 23 until December 30, 1942, the unit participated in classroom instruction and onshore training in amphibious techniques, followed by a series of amphibious exercises. The ATC's "Special Training Division" emphasized rugged, commando-style instruction designed to toughen the soldier. This included a realistic, live-fire obstacle course, a street-fighting course, water-survival exercises, and maneuvers in the camp's swampy interior.<sup>28</sup>

Providing suitable instruction posed numerous problems beyond basic construction needs. Training was hampered, for instance, by poor land communication between the separate training areas and by the distance between the camp's various sections. The center also suffered from a chronic shortage of landing craft and other equipment. Some students used dummy rifles and explosive devices, and instructors were forced to hold different colored flags to represent vehicles and equipment. Noted an army historian, "The story was the same from start to finish of the Amphibious Training Center— bickering and indecision in higher headquarters; expansion of the training mission and objective without corresponding expansion of facilities; and attempts on the part of the Center to accomplish its mission with whatever means could be made available. . . . Improvisation and plain Yankee ingenuity frequently saved the day."<sup>29</sup>

Even when these obstacles were surmounted, the results did not always meet expectations. The Thirty-eighth Division's training was to culminate with a major amphibious exercise on December 17-19, 1942. Unfortunately, the division and its supporting Engineer Amphibian Brigade failed miserably. Only one battalion landed in the approximately correct position, and another unit assaulted an undefended beach some twenty miles to the east. Not realizing their error, the troops advanced inland and "captured" the unsuspecting village of Crawfordville, located miles from the

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27. Becker, *Amphibious Training Center*, 12.

28. *Ibid.*, 12-13, 45-48, 57-70.

29. *Ibid.*, 48.

camp's boundaries. After a brief pause for Christmas, which some of the troops were able to spend in Tallahassee, soldiers repeated the exercise. Fortunately, it ended with better results.<sup>30</sup>

Other units followed the Thirty-eighth to Camp Gordon Johnston. January 1943 saw the arrival of the Twenty-eighth Infantry Division, commanded by the most famous soldier to train at the camp, General Omar Bradley. A future army group commander, Bradley held a less than favorable impression of the site and its facilities. These memories were still vivid years later when he wrote in his autobiography: "Camp Gordon Johnston was the most miserable Army installation I had seen since my days in Yuma, Arizona, ages past. It had been hacked out of palmetto scrub along a bleak stretch of beach. We were forced to scatter our three infantry regiments miles apart and thus could never train as a complete division. Moreover, it was bitterly cold in that northern leg of Florida. Every training exercise was a numbing experience. The man who selected that site should have been court-martialled for stupidity."<sup>31</sup>

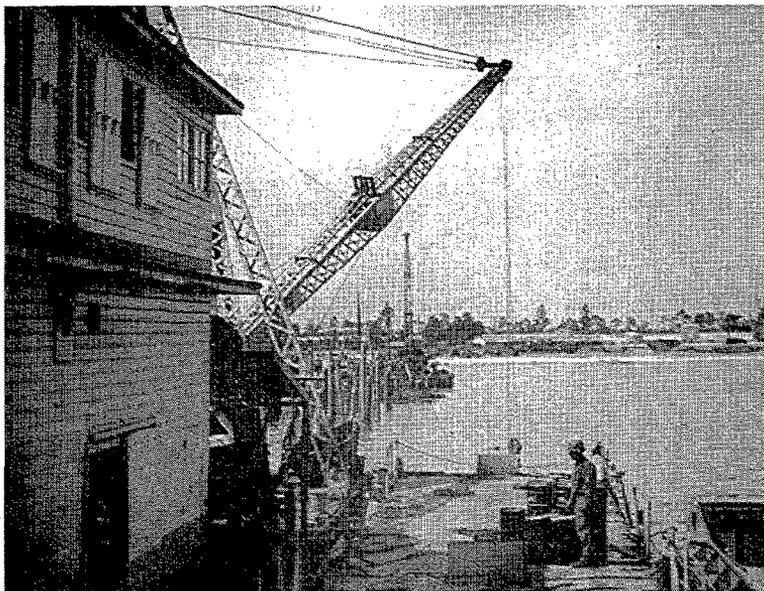
In fairness to the facility, even critics such as Bradley recognized its strengths. The general admitted that the training his division received there was invaluable to its later combat service. "Day after day," he recorded, "our various divisional units practiced assaulting a small island off the coast held by the 'enemy.' It was a new experience for all of us." Bradley explained further, "I had studied amphibious warfare in schools and on my own [had] read a great deal about the British World War I amphibious debacle at Gallipoli in the Turkish Dardanelles, but I had never actually 'stormed a beach' in a LCV [landing craft, vehicle and personnel] or the other small craft produced for this purpose since Pearl Harbor. The training imbued in all of us a healthy new respect for the tactical and logistical problems involved, especially the logistical ones, which, I saw, could become nightmares in a twinkling."<sup>32</sup>

The Twenty-eighth Division trained at the ATC from late January through early March 1943. The final landing exercise began positively. Most units landed on the right beach at the right time,

30. *Ibid.*, 63-64.

31. Omar N. Bradley and Clay Blair, *A General's Life: An Autobiography* (New York, 1983) 112. Bradley's wife stayed at the lodge at Wakulla Springs, although the general noted that because of the hectic training schedule he could only visit her on Sundays.

32. *Ibid.*; Omar N. Bradley, *A Soldier's Story* (New York, 1951), 12-13.



Soldiers working on a pier at Camp Gordon Johnston, April 1944. Photograph Courtesy Florida Photographic Collection, Florida State Archives.

but tragedy struck on the second night when a severe storm struck the coast. Many landing craft tried to ride out the storm and were blown ashore and damaged or destroyed. The 302nd Coast Artillery Barrage Balloons Special Platoon, assisting in the exercise, saw all of its equipment destroyed. The most severe loss occurred in the Second Battalion of the 112th Infantry Regiment when a boat grounded on a sandbar. The coxswain, convinced that he had reached the designated beach, ordered the troops out of the boat, and the men disembarked into deep water that swept fourteen to their death. It was the worst loss of life recorded in camp history.<sup>33</sup>

Despite this tragedy the Twenty-eighth Division's training proceeded more smoothly than that of the Thirty-eighth, and the ATC seemed ready to continue its operations. At this same time, the center received some positive publicity when the army permitted

33. *Historical and Pictorial Review of the 28th Infantry Division in World War II* (n.p., 1946; reprint ed., Nashville, 1980); *Amphibian*, March 13, 1943; *Apalachicola Times*, March 12, 1943.

*Newsweek* magazine to publish an article detailing the tough exercises taking place there. The article referred to trainees as "specialized amphibious shock troops," who "have already received intensive Army training [and who] get a concentrated supplementary course in Commando-type combat somewhat like that taught in British battle schools." It complimented General Keating for establishing "what is probably the closest approach to actual combat given to any American troops." Further publicity came when Grantland Rice Pictures produced a film at the camp and at nearby Wakulla Springs, entitled *Amphibious Fighters*.<sup>34</sup>

These accolades were welcome, but premature, as the camp's Amphibious Training Center proved surprisingly short-lived. The Twenty-eighth Division was the last large unit to pass through the course. The Army Command quickly lost interest in administering shore-to-shore amphibious training. As a result the army chief of staff and Admiral Ernest King, chief of naval operations, agreed in March 1943 that the army would discontinue all amphibious training, save for a few engineer amphibious units and boat companies and that the navy would reassume these duties. Except for several independent battalions that were then undergoing training, no further units passed through the ATC, and the center formally disbanded on June 10, 1943.<sup>35</sup>

The troops trained at Gordon Johnston soon demonstrated the value of their Florida experiences. Of the two full divisions trained at Carrabelle, the Thirty-eighth conducted several amphibious landings in the Pacific, including New Guinea and the Philippines. The Twenty-eighth Division never used its amphibious training in combat, but it did earn a fine record in the European theater of operations during 1944-1945. Additionally, the Fourth Infantry Division, one of the finest American divisions in the European theater, participated in amphibious maneuvers at Carrabelle in September 1943 after the ATC had formally disbanded. The Second, Third, and Fourth Engineer Amphibious brigades, which had manned the boats during training at the camp, also earned enviable combat records, conducting dozens of amphibious land-

34. Roland C. Gask, "Prelude to Invasion: Real Bullets Enforce Lesson at Army Amphibious Training Center," *Newsweek*, March 22, 1943, 22-23; Tallahassee *Daily Democrat*, April 1, 1945; *Amphibian*, November 13, December 13, 1943.

35. Becker, *Amphibious Training Center*, 17.

ings in the southwest Pacific with General Douglas MacArthur's forces.<sup>36</sup>

With the closing of the ATC, Camp Gordon Johnston faced an uncertain future, but in September 1943 the installation entered a new phase when it received designation as an Army Service Forces (ASF) Training Center. Pacific fighting had brought requests for large numbers of small boat crews and amphibian truck companies for the army's use in island-hopping campaigns around New Guinea. As a result, Chief of Transportation Major General Charles P. Gross, apparently against his better judgment, selected Gordon Johnston as an ASF training center for both harbor craft companies and amphibian truck companies. The amphibian truck companies were equipped with vehicles referred to by the army as "1942 Amphibian, All-wheel Drive, Dual Rear Axle," but universally called the "DUKW." The DUKW revolutionized amphibious warfare, and the official history of the army's Transportation Corps claimed that training the amphibian truck companies "was a pioneer undertaking."<sup>37</sup>

ASF units received advanced training which varied in length from fourteen to twenty weeks. Many of the troops assigned to these units were black, and the army, reflecting widespread racial attitudes of the period, often questioned the troops' ability to perform their duties. Officials complained that training frequently had to be extended due to the "preponderance of substandard troops." According to the army, "The personnel assigned to these units averaged far below the desired level of skill and initiative. This was especially true of Negro personnel, most of whom had no mechanical background whatsoever and low mechanical aptitude." Its account added, "When it became evident that service troops would be made up largely of Negro troops, the Chief of Transportation tried to have an exception made of amphibian truck companies, but he was unsuccessful because of the Army's overall manpower problems."<sup>38</sup> This attitude undoubtedly affected

36. Shelby Stanton, *Order of Battle, U.S. Army, World War II* (Novato, CA, 1984), 81, 104, 123, 513-14, 519, 533; *The Combat History Fourth Infantry Division* (n.p., 1945), 16; *Historical and Pictorial Review of the 28th Infantry Division*.

37. Chester Wardlow, *The Transportation Corps: Movements, Training, and Supply* (Washington, 1956), 445; Chester Wardlow, *The Transportation Corps: Responsibilities, Organization, and Operations* (Washington, 1951), 124,256; *Jacksonville Florida Times-Union*, December 2, 1943.

38. Wardlow, *Transportation Corps: Movements, Training and Supply*, 448.

the quality of training received by these troops and their units. No available evidence suggests that the subsequent performance in combat of these units varied substantially from similar organizations comprised of white personnel.<sup>39</sup>

While adapting to its new mission, the camp continued to face substantial challenges. Its population averaged about 30,000 during the later months of the war, making it the largest community in the region. In addition to boat and truck companies, the ASF Training Center trained port construction and repair and maintenance units. During 1944 and 1945 a steady stream of troops passed through the courses.<sup>40</sup> Conditions at Gordon Johnston had improved considerably from the early days of the ATC, but the camp still offered harsh living in an isolated area. Officials had established various recreational facilities, which by the spring of 1945 included a library, five theaters, three service clubs for enlisted men, a noncommissioned officers' club, and an officers' club. Additionally, baseball and basketball leagues and boxing matches added variety to the troops' entertainment. Six chapels ministered to the soldiers' spiritual needs.

Despite these improvements, recreational facilities remained inadequate, as did transportation to and from camp. Soldiers complained loudly of the unreliable service of the Lee Bus Line, which connected them with the outside world. Ultimately officials constructed a passenger railroad for weekend service between Gordon Johnston and Tallahassee.<sup>41</sup>

Black soldiers felt that they received substandard treatment. Long after a service club, library, and guest house were available for white soldiers, black troops remained without such facilities. The situation led one soldier to complain in the *Amphibian*: "Have these men not given up their homes and nice surroundings the

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39. Despite critical comments on the capabilities of black units, the official history of the Transportation Corps notes that "the results generally achieved [by these units] were good" and that "in 1944 and 1945 the performance of these units in both assault and resupply operations was generally satisfactory. Some of them received citations for their accomplishments and conduct under fire." Wardlow, *Transportation Corps: Movements, Training, and Supply*, 448.

40. *Tallahassee Democrat*, August 15, 1980; Blanch D. Coll, Jean E. Keith, and Herbert H. Rosenthal, *The Corps of Engineers: Troops and Equipment* (Washington, 1958), 397-99; John D. Millett, *The Organization and Role of the Army Service Forces* (Washington, 1954), 327; Wardlow, *Transportation Corps: Movements, Training, and Supply*, 425-29, 444-49, 454-57.

41. *Amphibian*, October 27, 1944, April 14, 1945.



"Chow line," Camp Gordon Johnston, c. 1944. Photograph courtesy Florida Photographic Collection, Florida State archives.

same as other soldiers? . . . Are they not entitled to the same privileges as other men in the United States Army? We are not asking use of the Guest House or Service Club already here, but for one of our own which we feel is our legal right as soldiers."<sup>42</sup> Another black noncommissioned officer commented that the "lack of recreational activities for colored troops has been and still is a number one problem. With inadequate recreation on the post and almost nonexistent [sic] in nearby towns, constant dissatisfaction and unrest exist among the troops."<sup>43</sup> Segregated facilities for black soldiers were later completed, but the delay reflected the poor state of race relations during a war ostensibly to preserve freedom at home and abroad.

In addition to the substandard treatment afforded in the military, black soldiers also faced Jim Crow segregation laws when they visited nearby towns. This situation was particularly galling to northern-born blacks accustomed to less stringent practices. Disturbances in Tallahassee involving black soldiers on leave from

42. *Ibid.*, May 27, 1944.

43. *Ibid.*, June 3, 1944.

Gordon Johnston occasionally erupted during 1944-1945. Military police from nearby Dale Mabry Airfield held jurisdiction over Tallahassee. Even though the army used black military police to patrol the predominantly black sections of Tallahassee, Gordon Johnston troops felt that they were often treated unjustly. In August 1944 the beating of a Gordon Johnston soldier by black military police led to a riot in which civilian police armed with tear gas and weapons battled a large group of black servicemen. The *Atlanta Daily World*, a prominent black newspaper, reported that the actions of white police "placed the lives of hundreds of . . . citizens in danger."<sup>44</sup>

Two separate incidents took place in early October 1944 when black soldiers from Gordon Johnston fought with local civilian police and Dale Mabry MPs. The first disturbance began after white civilian police attempted to arrest a black soldier but were prevented from doing so and were then threatened by a large group of soldiers. Two hours later a fight between six drunken soldiers escalated into a minor riot when black soldiers attacked a force of black MPs trying to quell the disturbance. As a result of these incidents Tallahassee city manager Malcolm Yancey urged army officials to declare Tallahassee off limits to black soldiers on leave. Yancey stated, "If the military cannot control their men, I do not think it right and proper to expect a community of our size to furnish ample police for at least 1,000 drunken negro troops." Brigadier General William H. Holcombe, commander of the camp, evidently agreed. He temporarily stopped convoys taking soldiers to Tallahassee, and weeks later passes to the capital were still restricted for all Gordon Johnston troops.<sup>45</sup>

Another serious incident occurred in April 1945 when 200 to 250 black servicemen from Dale Mabry Airfield and Camp Gordon Johnston rampaged through the streets of Frenchtown, the capital's black business and residential district. The troops threw

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44. *Atlanta Daily World*, August 18, 1944; Tallahassee *Daily Democrat*, August 10, 1944. In August 1944 the army prepared a contingency plan in the event of increased racial disturbances in Tallahassee. The plan included cordoning off the predominantly black portions of the city and calling out members of the Florida State Guard. See "Racial Disturbance Plan, District No. 5, Fourth Service Command, for City of Tallahassee, 2 August 1944," RG 191, ser. 419, box 57, State Defense Council, Subject Files, Florida State Archives.

45. *Atlanta Daily World*, October 8, 1944; *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 14, 1944; Tallahassee *Daily Democrat*, October 2, 1944; Ellis and Rogers, *Favored Land*, 159; *Amphibian*, October 28, 1944.

bottles and rocks, damaged several black-owned businesses, and battled with military police and civilian law enforcement officials. The soldiers later claimed that their imminent departure overseas led to a determination to “take Frenchtovvn apart and paint it red.”<sup>46</sup> Despite these disturbances, training at Camp Gordon Johnston continued until the end of the war, with a large number of black ASF units passing through the installation.

During the spring of 1945 Allied armies raced across Germany, and Americans listened anxiously for news of the enemy’s surrender. When it finally occurred in early May, V-E Day brought jubilation to north Florida, although this was tempered by the realization that Japan still remained defiant. The camp commander issued a temporary state of emergency in the event that surrender news caused rioting among German and Italian prisoners of war that had been sent to the camp beginning in 1944. No problems occurred, either with the prisoners or celebrating American troops. The *Amphibian* reported that most of the men “took the sober view that there is still a big job yet to do and that to stop now would be almost sacrilegious.”<sup>47</sup>

Training continued after V-E Day. The military believed that Japan would not surrender until its home islands were invaded, and amphibious units would be expected to play a major role. Such training remained dangerous, as was evident from an accident that occurred in July 1945. During an airborne exercise on Dog Island a group of paratroopers from Fort Benning, Georgia, were blown off course by high winds. A number of the men landed in East Pass, between Dog and St. George islands. Tragically ten soldiers drowned, weighed down by their heavy equipment.<sup>48</sup>

News of the Japanese surrender in August 1945 caused jubilation in the camp. After an initial period of disbelief, “victory hit Camp Gordon Johnston like a delayed action bomb.”<sup>49</sup> Impromptu concerts and parades were held, and demand for beer was so great that bartenders served it warm. Soldiers on leave in Tallahassee joined in the celebration. A local newspaper reported the day after Japan’s surrender, “News of the Japanese capitulation last night hit Tallahassee with the force of Uncle Sam’s new atomic bomb and

46. Tallahassee *Daily Democrat*, April 2, 4, 1945; Ellis and Rogers, *Favored Land*, 157.

47. *Amphibian*, May 8, 1945; Tallahassee *Daily Democrat*, May 7, 1945.

48. *Amphibian*, July 14, 21, 1945; *Apalachicola Times*, July 20, 1945.

49. *Amphibian*, August 18, 1945.

was the signal for everybody to unloose that pent-up feeling and start what old-timers view as the most wild, spontaneous and enthusiastic celebration ever witnessed in the Capital City."<sup>50</sup>

With the war's end, temporary installations such as Camp Gordon Johnston immediately became obsolete. Although designated as a redeployment camp, the number of troops stationed there declined quickly. The federal government moved to dispose of the more than 165,000 acres of land that it had bought or leased. In February 1946 the Army Service Forces Training Center was officially discontinued, and the remaining troops transferred to Fort Eustis, Virginia. Only a small caretaker force remained to read the final issue of the *Amphibian* on February 28. The installation formally closed one month later.<sup>51</sup>

Cleanup operations proceeded with all due speed. By the end of 1946 more than 60,000 acres of land had been sold or had its leases cancelled. In December of the same year the army returned to the St. Joe Paper Company some 37,000 acres and 600 barracks buildings. The army also paid a fee of \$37,000, "in lieu of a restoration of land to its original condition as prescribed by the [original] lease." Even after this transfer, the military still occupied about 1,000 buildings and 2,000 acres upon which was located the former post headquarters, hospitals, theaters, recreation centers, and mess halls.<sup>52</sup>

The army, apparently in 1947, divested itself of the remainder of the old camp. The St. Joe Paper Company reclaimed most of the interior training areas, and along the coast some camp buildings were refurbished into tourist cottages. Shrimpers and fishermen, who had been largely displaced during the war, moored their craft again at Carrabelle. Lanark eventually became a retirement community. Today, few traces remain of Camp Gordon Johnston. One veteran who returned to the area during the 1980s lamented: "I spent four months training in this place and don't recognize a thing[.] I've been back to the Philippines, to Japan. It was easier to find the places I served there than when we were here."<sup>53</sup>

50. Tallahassee *Daily Democrat*, August 15, 1945; *Apalachicola Times*, August 17, 1945.

51. *Amphibian*, February 28, 1946, Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, February 15, 1946.

52. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, December 3, 1946.

53. Tallahassee *Democrat*, May 26, 1985.

Despite the lack of commemoration, the training that took place at Camp Gordon Johnston from 1942 until 1945 played a role in the winning of World War II. In both the Pacific and European theaters, the ability to launch amphibious operations against enemy-held coastlines proved vital. Army troops entered the war with little practical experience in this skill, and the equipment and doctrine needed to conduct such operations successfully either did not exist or needed much refinement. Without the realistic training and the experience gained at Camp Gordon Johnston and the other ATCs, the blood spilled on numerous beaches might have been greater, and the length and cost of the war much longer.