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Gary R. Mormino



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GI JOE MEETS JIM CROW:
RACIAL VIOLENCE AND REFORM
IN WORLD WAR II FLORIDA

by GARY R. MORMINO

WHERE were you on December 7, 1941, and what did you experience on that memorable day? If you were Master Sergeant Warren Bryant, stationed at Tampa's MacDill Field, you were reminded of your place in American society. Bryant explained the coming of war: "When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor . . . all of the whites at MacDill Field were running around with loaded guns. We [blacks] had no guns and no idea of what was going on, so you can imagine what was running through our minds until we learned of the Japanese attack. Even with this knowledge it was of no comfort to be practically penned in our area with armed patty boys all over everywhere. We trusted them just about as much as a coiled rattlesnake."¹ "GI Joe Meets Jim Crow" examines the tensions and violence that erupted on and off military camps in Florida during World War II and their role in the development of the civil rights movement.

In the weeks following Pearl Harbor, African American leaders pledged a fight on two fronts—victory abroad against fascism and victory at home against racism. Articulating the urgency of fighting on two fronts was relatively easy; the reality of confronting segregated armed services and the Jim Crow South proved daunting.²

Although the United States fought World War II with images of democracy pressing the fight against tyranny, the U.S. military

Gary R. Mormino is professor of history, University of South Florida, Tampa.

1. Quoted in interview of Master Sergeant Warren Bryant, *The Invisible Soldier: The Experience of the Black Soldier, World War II*, comp. and ed. Mary Penick Motley (Detroit, 1975), 250-51.
2. Lee Finkle, *Forum for Protest: The Black Press during World War II* (Rutherford, NJ, 1975).

structure mirrored America's racially segregated society.³ The *Bradenton Herald* ran a flyer in 1943 announcing, "Negroes 18 to 50 years old may enlist as mess attendants in the U.S. Navy."⁴ The navy, however, operated under a racial caste system, and the U.S. Marines excluded African Americans entirely at the start of the war. As the war progressed, the military, pressed for manpower and pressured by group leaders, liberalized recruitment policies. In the summer of 1942 the marines, for the first time in 167 years, created a Marine Corps Negro Battalion. "Negroes having training as barbers, cooks, bakers, clerks, and truck drivers have been urged to enlist immediately," ran a marines advertisement.⁵

As Floridians marched off to basic training, the state's newspapers reported the news in black and white. "Two contingents of colored boys . . . headed for camp," reported the *DeFuniak Herald* in 1942. Later it noted, "Here are the names of the young men (white) who will leave."⁶ Other notices included: "17 White Men Off to Camp," "37 Negroes Sent to Camp Blanding," and "225 Negroes Are Called to Blanding."⁷

Historically, military service has offered minority groups in American society the opportunity to affirm their loyalty to the host society. Thus, immigrants volunteered in numbers out of proportion to their size in order to validate their patriotism. African Americans, however, encountered roadblocks in their path to military respect. "From the beginning of World War II," argues Richard Dalfiume, "the army set out to implement its version of separate but equal."⁸ Many black leaders remembered the bitter experiences of World War I when African Americans volunteered for the Great Crusade, only to return home to an America beset by race riots, a revived Ku Klux Klan, and nativist violence. Throughout the

3. Robert J. Jakeman, *The Divided Skies: Establishing Segregated Flight Training at Tuskegee, Alabama, 1934-1942* (Tuscaloosa, 1992); Finkle, *Forum For Protest*, 156-57; Bernard C. Nalty, *Strength for the Fight: A History of Black Americans in the Military* (New York, 1986), 143-204; Ulysses Grant Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops* (Washington, DC, 1966); Richard M. Dalfiume, *Desegregation of the United States Armed Forces, 1939-1953* (Columbia, 1969).

4. *Bradenton Herald*, January 5, 1943.

5. Jakeman, *Divided Skies*, vi; *Tampa Morning Tribune*, June 16, 1942.

6. *DeFuniak Herald*, August 6, 30, 1942.

7. *Tallahassee Democrat*, August 21, 1944; *Tampa Morning Tribune*, April 27, 1941, June 4, 1943; *Hendry County News*, April 17, 1941; *Sanford Herald*, July 9, 1945; *Gadsden County News*, January 14, 1943.

8. Richard M. Dalfiume, *A Guide to the Microfilm Edition of the Papers of the NAACP* (Bethesda, MD, 1989), xii.

Second World War, Florida's American Legion refused First World War African American veterans a charter.⁹

The very presence of black troops in the South sparked controversy in some quarters. Throughout the war, selecting camps for the training of African American soldiers vexed the War Department.¹⁰ In 1944 Florida Congressman Robert Sikes protested to Rear Admiral George D. Murray upon hearing reports that white and black sailors were billeted together at the Pensacola Naval Air Station. The admiral reassured Sikes that "in no cases is indiscriminate mixing of these groups permitted."¹¹

While many soldiers who trained in Florida found the weather balmy, others found the racial climate chilling. Between 1941 and 1946 racial conflict boiled over on and off Florida military bases. Participants included commissioned and noncommissioned officers, civilians and prisoners of war, military police and county sheriffs, Northerners and Southerners.

Tallahassee was the site of some of Florida's most serious racial disorders during World War II. Beneath the veneer of southern charm stood a city and region fiercely dedicated to preserving a segregated society. In 1940 Tallahassee had a population of 16,240, of which 40 percent were black. Tallahassee's large black neighborhood attracted African American servicemen from the Third Army Air Force stationed at Dale Mabry Field, located three miles west of the capital, and from the Amphibious Training Center at Camp Gordon Johnston sixty miles away in Carrabelle.¹²

Mobilization for war jarred the rhythms of city and campus. The 1942 homecoming game at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical College reflected the changes. In 1941 fans packed Florida Stadium, forcing many white spectators to stand on the sidelines. The state mandated new seating procedures, which segregated black soldiers to the sidelines while white fans received reserved seating. "Two white military policemen who had been stationed there to

9. *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 30, 1944.

10. Lee, *Employment of Negro Troops*, 100-07.

11. *Pensacola Journal*, April 19, 1944. See also speech by Alabama Senator John Hollis Bankhead II, in *Atlanta Daily World*, August 4, 1942; *Fort Myers News Press*, August 3, 1942; *Bradenton Herald*, April 21, 1944.

12. Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940. Population, Volume II* (Washington, 1943), 124; Tom Waggy, *Governor LeRoy Collins of Florida: Spokesman of the New South* (University, AL, 1985), 11-12, 48-49; Mary Louise Ellis and William Warren Rogers, *Favored Land, Tallahassee: A History of Tallahassee and Leon County* (Norfolk, VA, 1988), 151-52, 157.

keep the soldiers in the restricted area were busily engaged in forcing these former Florida students [now soldiers] to leave the regular grandstand," reported the *Atlanta Daily World*. An African American soldier filched a nightstick from an MP, and twenty-five MPs invaded the stadium searching for the offender and putting a "damper on the game."¹³

Tallahassee's Frenchtown became the setting for a series of ugly military riots, which frequently escalated into racial disorders. A familiar scenario emerged: African American troops from rival military bases converged upon Frenchtown. Arguments degenerated into a fracas, almost always made worse by the arrival of white Tallahassee and military police.

In September 1942 Tallahassee police responded to a fight between black soldiers and civilians in Frenchtown. Police shot and killed Private Wilbur Harris, allegedly for resisting arrest. According to the Tallahassee *Daily Democrat*, "Civilian officers and M.P.'s then lined up the negro soldiers and civilians along the streets until an emergency squad from Dale Mabry Field, armed with rifles, arrived."¹⁴ Two months later a black soldier at Dale Mabry Field violated racial decorum when he attempted to purchase a drink from a vending machine reserved for white civilian workers. Scores of black soldiers and whites scuffled, resulting in injuries to eight individuals.¹⁵

In the spring of 1944 authorities at Dale Mabry Field confronted a "mutiny." According to testimony, a group of black soldiers refused to obey orders until granted a forum to air their grievances about racial practices. Five soldiers, all northern blacks, received dishonorable discharges and long prison sentences.¹⁶

Protests echoed in the black press. A person identified as "A Constant Reader" wrote to the *Pittsburgh Courier* pleading: "Please tell me how the President of the United States knowing that we are at war, allows the Negro soldier to be treated so intolerably? . . . Does he condone the treatment of those soldiers in Alabama and those in Tallahassee, Florida?"¹⁷

13. *Atlanta Daily World*, November 3, 1942.

14. Tallahassee *Daily Democrat*, September 6, 13, 1942.

15. *Ibid.*, November 6, 1942; *Tampa Tribune*, November 7, 1942.

16. *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 8, 1944; Tallahassee *Daily Democrat*, May 4, 1944; *Fort Lauderdale Daily News*, May 4, 1944.

17. *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 29, 1944.

Black troops chafed at conditions encountered in north Florida. On one occasion the NAACP received a letter entitled "Mistreatment of Soldiers in Dixie," signed "Members of the 1869th engr avn bn [engineering aviation battalion]." The letter listed a litany of problems faced by "several hundred negro soldiers here at Dale Mabry Field." Writers noted, "Above all we have Southern White Crackers as officers over us who abuse us, and treat us worse than we would treat the lowest of dogs." The complaints pointed out that German prisoners of war received more respect and better food than African American troops. Indeed, "we are treated more like prisoners of war than members of the armed forces."¹⁸ Private E. Bryant claimed the commanding officer thinks, "The Negro's radical." He closed the letter, "I am always in there continuously fighting for the rights of the Negro in the service."¹⁹

African American soldiers also wrote hometown newspapers. "A Negro Soldier" appealed to the *Baltimore Afro American* to expose conditions at Camp Gordon Johnston. "We cannot go to the church services on the camp," he exclaimed, adding, "The service clubs are off limit for us." The author fumed over a recent episode. Black troops had organized a dance and invited female guests from Tallahassee. "There were about 30 lounging chairs for our guests to relax in but the white M.P. made them get out of them." During the evening the white military police "got a rope and started roping our girls off like sheep. . . . They were herded up like a flock of sheep." "Most of us hail from the North," confessed the soldier.²⁰

Letters and protests went unanswered, and in August 1944 another disturbance flared up in Frenchtown. The *Atlanta Daily World* described the tumult: "Armed with revolvers, riot guns and tear gas bombs, a group of Tallahassee civilian policemen, taking part in a disturbance involving only military personnel, placed the lives of hundreds of race citizens in danger." A city official recommended

18. Mistreatment of Negro Soldiers in Dixie, *Papers of the NAACP*: pt. 9, ser. B, Discrimination in the U.S. Armed Forces, 1918-1955, Armed Forces Legal Files, 1940-1950, roll 13, 613-14. All subsequent references to this source are taken from pt. 9, ser. B of the collection unless stated otherwise.

19. E. Bryant to NAACP, October 14, 1944, *Papers of the NAACP*: roll 11, 582-83.

20. Philip McGuire, *Taps For a Jim Crow Army: Letters from Black Soldiers in World War II* (Santa Barbara, CA, 1983), 5, 19-20.

to military authorities that black soldiers from Camp Gordon Johnston be banned from visiting Tallahassee on weekends.²¹

Normally, Sundays in Tallahassee passed quietly with ample portions of old-time religion, fried chicken, and rest. But on one Sunday in October 1944, Tallahassee reverberated with police sirens responding to two separate military riots. In the first imbroglio, black soldiers from Camp Gordon Johnston clashed with civilian and military police. Trouble could have been avoided, argued the *Atlanta Daily World*, "if the local police had allowed the colored MPs from Dale Mabry Field to arrest a soldier in this section. The police took things into their own hands, thereby creating excitement when they approached one of the men with drawn pistols. The soldiers then surrounded the police and would not allow them to take the soldiers." The paper reminded readers that while white MPs carried guns, their black counterparts generally employed nightsticks. Following the second incident involving soldiers and police, Brigadier General Holcombe, commanding officer at Camp Gordon Johnston, announced that "no more Negro soldiers would be conveyed to Tallahassee."²²

Alarmed by the fractious behavior of African American troops, the intelligence officer at Dale Mabry Field filed a "Weekly Report Concerning the Racial Situation." Major Sakser observed in November 1944, "There is of course still an occasional gripe from Negroes who are compelled to occupy rear seats in the city buses."²³

From the beginning of the war, the military made efforts to boost the flagging morale of African American troops. In 1942 the Army Air Force arranged a visit by the Ninety-ninth Fighter Squadron, the first such outfit manned by blacks. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., served as commanding officer of the decorated unit. His father, Benjamin O. Davis, was the first African American to hold the rank of general. General Davis visited troops around the world, urging harmony, and preached more understanding between townfolk

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21. Tallahassee *Daily Democrat*, August 10, 1944; *Atlanta Daily World*, August 18, 1944. For additional commentary on problems encountered at Camp Gordon Johnston see Lee, *Employment of Negro Troops*, 244, 266.
 22. *Atlanta Daily World*, October 8, 1944; *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 14, 1944; Tallahassee *Daily Democrat*, October 2, 1944.
 23. Frank J. Sakser, Historical Report of Dale Mabry Field, Tallahassee, Florida, November 1944, quoted in Erica R. Clark, "Tallahassee and Dale Mabry Army Air Base" (unpublished manuscript, Florida Collection, State Library of Florida, Tallahassee), 12.

and soldiers at home. Panama City, for instance, sponsored a GI Joe Day for Negro Troops. Groups such as Lee Norman and his band came South in an "All-Colored USO Show." Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune, Joe Louis, and Sugar Ray Robinson also toured Florida military camps.²⁴

The Negro Athletic Leagues and "all-colored" USO extravaganzas could not assure harmony. In April 1945 Tallahassee experienced its final and most serious military riot. Police battled at least 250 black soldiers from Dale Mabry Field and Camp Gordon Johnston who descended upon Frenchtown. The troops— many of whom had just received combat orders— had announced their intent to "paint it [Frenchtown] red" and "tear it apart." The neighborhood suffered heavy damage as rioters ransacked stores and establishments. Tallahassee police responded with tear gas, and military police, armed with tommy guns, arrested scores of soldiers. Authorities declared martial law for several hours. According to the *Tampa Bulletin*, a black newspaper, the guilty soldiers disappeared the next morning. The Tallahassee city manager recommended that authorities keep a detachment of MPs in the city.²⁵

Warnings had surfaced for some time about the potential explosiveness of conditions in north Florida. In March 1945 the NAACP's Roy Wilkins received a letter from A. Maceo Smith of the Texas NAACP. Smith had just interviewed former Dallas resident Corporal James Otis, who in early 1945 had served at Dale Mabry Field. Otis related "that there are more than 3,000 Negro soldiers at this Florida installation who are being discriminated against to the maximum degree." Moreover, "there is no Negro chaplain assigned to this contingent to whom these men may express their distaste for this treatment in confidence. Of the 3,000, 200 are wounded and sick soldiers needing hospital care."²⁶

Letters to the NAACP record an outpouring of frustration and the growing militancy of African American soldiers. Three such

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24. *Tampa Tribune*, March 21, October 16, 1942; Ellis and Rogers, *Favored Land*, 150; *Panama City News Herald*, September 1, 5, December 26, 1944; Orlando Air Field *The AAFSATONION*, April 10, 1943; Camp Blanding *Bayonet*, January 14, 1944; *Atlanta Daily World*, August 15, 1945.
 25. Tallahassee *Daily Democrat*, April 2, 4, 1945; *Gadsden County News*, April 5, 1945; *Tampa Bulletin*, April 21, 1945. The Franklin Delano Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York, houses the only extant copy of the April 21, 1945, *Tampa Bulletin*.
 26. A. Maceo Smith to Roy Wilkins, March 12, 1945, *Papers of the NAACP*, roll 12, 52.

1944 letters pinpointed problems at Tallahassee and Camp Gordon Johnston. Louis Alexander, writing "somewhere in Dutch New Guinea . . . where he read about troubles in Tallahassee," declared, "Being one of the many soldiers that was forced to take training at Camp Gordon Johnston, Fla., I found many things and conditions that were a blow to soldier morale."²⁷

In September 1944 William H. Hastie and Thurgood Marshall met to discuss Camp Gordon Johnston. Hastie, then dean at Howard University's law school but earlier a figure instrumental in promoting civil rights for African American soldiers, called for "an investigation of the physical conditions and treatment of Negro troops at the Camp." Several black soldiers had attempted to enlist Hastie's and the NAACP's assistance in exposing racial conditions at Carrabelle. Army officials had assigned blacks exclusively to clean the outhouses, and a group of seventy-five soldiers resisted the order, only to be sent to the stockade.²⁸ Private John Hammond, director of Negro Activities, contended, "Segregation has reappeared in all its fury."²⁹ A supporting letter, signed "One who would serve," urged the NAACP's Walter White to investigate Camp Gordon Johnston. "I believe I owe it to my race to report this. May I repeat, destroy this when you're finished."³⁰

Disturbed by mounting evidence of racial unrest on and off military bases, the NAACP commissioned a special study of the situation in July 1945. The association selected Jesse O. Dedmon, Jr., to tour fifteen troubled sites, including Camp Gordon Johnston, Dale Mabry Field, and MacDill Air Field. By July 1945, Camp Gordon Johnston contained 7,000 troops, including 1,400 African American soldiers. One hundred white officers commanded the base; two black officers, a captain, and first lieutenant led the "colored troops." The base had no black chaplain. The inspector found the black quarters "excellent" in terms of cleanliness but poor in the quality of recreational opportunities. Army Memorandum No. 97, which prohibited segregation in recreational facilities,

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27. Louis Alexander to NAACP, September 7, 1944, *Papers of the NAACP*, roll 12, 679-81.
 28. William H. Hastie to Thurgood Marshall, September 15, 1944, *Papers of the NAACP*, roll 12, 678.
 29. John Hammond to Walter White, September 11, 1944, *Papers of the NAACP*, roll 12, 676.
 30. "One who would Serve" to White, September 18, 1944, *Papers of the NAACP*, roll 12, 682-86.

was neither posted nor followed. Blacks and whites frequented the same dispensary but at separate posted times. The hospital staffed no black nurses, dentists, or physicians, and hospital lavatory signs indicated “colored” or “negro.” African American soldiers complained of no opportunities to pursue advanced technical training and of the disrespect shown by white civilian clerks at the post exchange.³¹

Contemporaries and historians depict Tampa as Florida’s most racially troubled city, noteworthy for both the number and intensity of disturbances. Ironically, the coming of the military to Tampa promised optimism, a safeguard against the vicissitudes of economic depression and labor turbulence. On July 14, 1939, the military announced plans for MacDill Army Air Field to be constructed at the southern tip of the uninhabited interbay peninsula. MacDill became headquarters for the Twelfth Air Force Combat Bomber Command. In mid 1941 the War Department activated Drew Army Air Field, headquarters for the Third Air Force, on the site of today’s Tampa International Airport. MacDill and Drew fields helped prepare pilots and training crews for the B-17 and B-29 fleets.³²

MacDill officials trumpeted the benefits of the base in a steady stream of public relations documents. Beginning in 1943 a lavishly illustrated magazine, *Thunderbird*, was published. African Americans appeared occasionally in it, shown serving food and changing tires, but little else. In fact by 1945 MacDill housed 3,000 black servicemen, comprising a quarter of the base’s troop strength. In July 1945 a single black chaplain constituted the only officer. In 1945 NAACP officials complained, “The post’s policy is complete segregation of the races.”³³

Tampa might have seemed an ideal setting for black troops. In 1940 African Americans represented 25 percent of Tampa’s population, and a large black commercial district existed along the area known as “the Scrub.” Nonetheless, race relations in Tampa foreshadowed trouble. The city boasted not a single African American

31. Data for Camp Investigation, MacDill Field, July 9, 1945, *Papers of the NAACP*, roll 9, 733, 742-45.

32. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, July 14, 1939, May 5, 1947; Karl Grismer, *Tampa* (St. Petersburg, 1950), 279-81.

33. *Thunderbird: MacDill Field Quarterly* 1-2 (1943-1944); Data for Camp Investigation, MacDill Field, July 12, 1945, *Papers of the NAACP*, roll 9,733, 750-93.

lawyer in 1940.³⁴ As events unfolded a black attorney would have been useful.

World War II was not the first encounter between African American soldiers and Tampa. During Reconstruction and again in 1898 the presence of black troops sent paroxysms of anger through the white community, contributing to violence and the formation of the Ku Klux Klan. "It is indeed very humiliating to the American citizens and especially to the people of Tampa," argued the *Tribune* in 1898, "to be compelled to submit to the insults and mendacity perpetrated by the colored troops that are now camped in this city."³⁵

Relations between the African American community and Tampa police in the decades prior to the 1940s had been at best patronizing and negligent— at worst, racist and brutal. Moreover, corruption infected city and county law enforcement officials, who allowed organized gambling and prostitution to flourish. Recurrent crises involving soldiers and police reinforced Tampa's image as "Hell Hole of the Gulf Coast." In 1942, as a result of repeated episodes of violence and civil rights violations, the American Civil Liberties Union branded Tampa one of eleven centers of repression in the United States.³⁶

African American soldiers vividly remembered their introduction to Tampa. One soldier reminisced that upon arriving in Tampa by train a "big red-necked sheriff" met the enlisted men. The deputy pontificated about southern manners and morals and about how social life was limited to one area of town— the black district along Central Avenue. Warren Bryant recalled, "When we got a chance to go to town we had to wait until all of the white soldiers who wished to go had been taken to their destination; then we were

34. Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940. Population, Volume III* (Washington, 1943), 666. While Tampa supported no African American lawyers, the city did boast fifty-one black clergymen and forty-three black teachers in 1940. The Tampa City Federation of Negro Women's Clubs erected a recreation center for servicemen. See *Tampa Daily Times*, June 26, 1943; *Tampa Morning Tribune*, June 26, 1943.

35. Maria Louisa Daegenhardt Archer Reminiscences, Historical Museum of Southern Florida, Miami, transcription by Patsy West; James McKay, Jr., "History of Tampa of the Olden Days," *Tampa Times*, December 18, 1923; *Tampa Morning Tribune*, May 12, 1898; Willard Gatewood, Jr., "Negro Troops in Florida, 1898," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 49 (July 1970), 1-15.

36. Alan M. Osur, *Blacks in the Army Air Forces during World War II: The Problem of Race Relations* (Washington, 1977; reprint ed., Washington, 1980), 90.

crowded like sardines into a couple of buses and driven directly to the colored section. . . . Frankly we [812th Aviation Engineers] were delighted when orders came for us to go. . . . Anything was better than this hell hole.³⁷

On July 15, 1941, soldiers and police clashed anew. An argument in the city's black commercial district resulted in the arrest of a black soldier by white MPs. Police sped the arrested man away to the nearby military stockade. While military police milled around the scene of the arrest, a black sergeant verbally harassed an MP. Police began clubbing the sergeant, and a Tampa patrolman shot him while he was prostrate. A near riot ensued as black soldiers charged the policemen, resulting in the shooting of a second serviceman.

In June 1943 a racial standoff occurred at MacDill Air Field. The event, never acknowledged in local newspapers, was classified as "a mutiny" by the War Department. According to the investigation, the affair erupted over a trivial incident in the base post exchange for black servicemen. An argument between a black soldier and a "tired, irritable white saleswoman" attracted a crowd, and soon a fight began. Some black soldiers apparently obtained guns, fearful of the consequences of the fracas. Authorities discovered the guns stored in a black barracks and charged Private Frank V. Stovall and eighteen other African American soldiers with conspiracy to riot and mutiny. Julia Padron, Stovall's cousin, asked the NAACP to "make an investigation at once." She added, "Frank thinks they got him and 18 other boys because they are from the North." Alice Baird, Stovall's sister-in-law explained, "We are quite worried about him because he is from the North, and the stories that come in here at the office from the camps in the south are enough to frighten me." On October 16 Stovall and nine fellow sol-

37. Robert P. Ingalls, *Urban Vigilantes in the New South: Tampa, 1882-1934* (Knoxville, 1988); Gary R. Mormino and George E. Pozzetta, *The Immigrant World of Ybor City: Italians and Their Latin Neighbors in Tampa, 1885-1985* (Urbana, 1987), 280-86; Virginius Dabney, *Below the Potomac: A Book About the New South* (New York, 1939; reprint ed., Port Washington, NY, 1942), 128; *Tampa Daily Times*, January 15, 1944; Motley, *Invisible Soldier*, 250-52. Gordon Chambers also served with the 812th Aviation Engineers and recalls today the bitter encounters with civilian and military police. Interviews with Gordon Chambers, April 5, 12, 1994, notes in author's possession.

38. *Tampa Daily Times*, July 16, 1941; *Tampa Morning Tribune*, July 17, 1941; Lee, *Employment of Negro Troops*, 350-51.

diers faced a court martial at MacDill Field. All received sentences of ten years (later reduced to five years).³⁹

Black soldiers also complained about venereal disease checks— “applied to blacks only” — as they traveled to and from Tampa. Venereal disease would seemingly be a societal problem, but it acquired a racial stigma during the war. The problem was serious. Tampa’s Social Protection Division reported in 1945 that venereal disease rates among African Americans stationed locally reached a rate of 415 per 1,000, while the overall incidence was 158 per 1,000 soldiers. Tampa mayor Robert E. Lee Chancey attacked black servicemen rather than the source of the problem. “If we had no Negro soldiers here,” he insisted in 1943, “our record for social protection for military personnel would be one of the finest in the United States.”⁴⁰

In February 1944 a minor incident between police and black soldiers escalated into a riot. According to newspaper accounts, Tampa police raced enroute to a narcotics raid in “the Scrub” when a black serviceman cursed army intelligence captain T. L. Tedford, who was attempting to clear traffic. Captain Tedford ordered military police to arrest the offender. Black soldiers came to the aid of their fellow soldier, thereby preventing his arrest. Soon a crowd of more than 100 angry black residents surrounded the police and servicemen. City and military police reinforcements eventually dispersed the crowd and sped the suspect to the nearby military police substation. There, reported the *Tampa Daily Times*, “a huge mob, estimated at more than 4,000, assembled about the station and demanded that the man be released. Calls for help were broadcast and three armored riot cars . . . all city patrol cars . . . and sheriffs deputies rushed to the battle scene.” Altogether more than 100 civilian and military police “armed with machine guns, revolvers and bayonets” confronted the angry crowd. The protestors hurled bottles and flower pots at police. The press described the event’s denouement. “Faced by the menacing guns of

39. Stovall Court Martial, *Papers of the NAACP*, roll 5, 725-779; *Ibid.*, pt. 9, ser. C, Discrimination in the U.S. Armed Forces, 1918-1955, The Veterans Affairs Committee, 1940-1950, roll 4, 34456; Osur, *Blacks in the Army Air Forces*, 86, 103, 194.

40. Osur, *Blacks in the Army Air Forces*, 103; *Tampa Morning Tribune*, July 14, August 24, 1945; *Tampa Daily Times*, July 15, September 1, 1943; Dawn Truax, “Victory Girls and Social Protection in World War II Tampa,” in *Florida at War*, ed. Lewis N. Wynne (St. Leo, 1993), 29-49.

Army men, the Negroes finally dispersed and police immediately closed every saloon, juke joint, restaurant, theater and store on the street [Central Avenue]. Twenty-four Negroes were taken to the City Jail for trial . . . on charges of creating a disturbance and inciting a riot." The *Tribune* headline pronounced, "Civil and Army Police Quell Rioting Negroes."⁴¹

A rare wartime news account from a Florida black newspaper adds a fresh dimension to the February 1944 riot. "Innocent Church Leaders Arrested," an indignant *Tampa Bulletin* declared. "Those of us who were beginning to believe we were approaching a day wherein a minority group would be protected instead of being subjected to terrorism, and that racial feelings were ebbing, in an effort to create a united people, were sharply awakened by the men who represent the law in this city." The paper concluded, "How can we expect to even hope for victory with such treatment meted out to innocent Negroes of Tampa Sunday night?" The arrest list, noted the paper, included a deacon and an usher caught outside Beulah Baptist Church.⁴²

In February 1945 the *Atlanta Daily World* reported on continuing racial tensions at MacDill Field. "The German prisoners of war," noted the paper, "have started here a system of working hat in hand with the Bourbon South in the matter of giving the Negro soldiers another slap in the face." German POWs assigned as cooks at the MacDill base hospital refused to work if black military patients continued to dine in the same hall as whites, despite the fact that whites and blacks ate in separate sides of the mess hall. Hospital officials stated they were acting on orders from Washington and immediately began a system of feeding the African American personnel in a separate mess hall entirely. Morale, stated the reporter, plummeted "from humiliation to utter disgust."⁴³

When evaluating the sheer number of violent racial incidents, which resulted in several deaths and scores of injuries, historians

41. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, February 21, 22, 1944; *Tampa Daily Times*, February 21, 22, 1944; Lee, *Employment of Negro Troops*, 375.

42. *Tampa Bulletin* clipping in *Papers of the NAACP*, roll 12, 181. Sadly, only fragments of the black press have survived. During the war an extensive black press existed in Florida: the *Miami Whip*, *Pensacola Courier*, *Jacksonville Sentinel*, *Tampa Bulletin*, and *Pinellas Negro Weekly*. Only three extant single issues have been found.

43. *Atlanta Daily World*, February 9, 1945. The juxtaposition of German POWs and the Jim Crow South is well documented. For another incident in Florida see the case of Herbert F. Keresky, *Miami Herald*, May 7, 1985.

struggle to distinguish between what contemporaries branded as fracasés, melees, riots, and mutinies. The difference between an angry crowd and a mob depends upon the perspective of time, distance, and politics. One historian of the South contends that during World War II racial disorders resulted in at least six civilian riots, twenty military riots or mutinies, and forty lynchings.⁴⁴ When evaluated individually, no single incident in Florida stands as a defining moment of the war years; when evaluated collectively, however, the violence and racism reveal deep flaws in military policy and civilian attitudes. Moreover, the many individual acts of war-time rebellion and frustration by African Americans had a cumulative effect on civilian and military leaders who in the summer of 1944 expressed growing alarm over the escalation of racial violence throughout the United States. The 1943 riots in Detroit, Los Angeles, Harlem, and Beaumont, combined with their own experiences, made authorities in Florida especially nervous.

In August 1944 the Army Service Forces, headquartered at Camp Blanding, prepared for the worst. In a series of secret documents, the agency anticipated renewed race riots and the imposition of martial law. The Army Service Forces targeted Tallahassee, Jacksonville, Miami, Orlando, Tampa, and St. Petersburg. Reports detail each city. "In the city of Orlando," the report noted, "there is an undercurrent of tension, activated by union organizers and the presence of Northern negro soldiers in the community. Increased earning power caused by war activities . . . result in idleness and disorderly conduct and a resentment on the part of the white population toward negroes['] refusal to perform necessary work." In Miami, it was reported, "There are many negro dives and joints and it is in these areas that negroes of the trouble-maker type reside and congregate." In Tampa, authorities prepared a prospective press release: "Racial disorders, now in progress in Tampa, Florida between members of the Caucasian and negro races, with attendant riots and bloodshed, have progressed beyond the control of civil authorities."⁴⁵

In each targeted city the Army Service Forces identified the location of black-owned newspapers and radio stations. Future emer-

44. Albert James Burran, "Racial Violence in the South During World War Two" (Ph.D. diss., University of Tennessee, 1977), 2.

45. Racial Disturbance Plan. District No. 5, Fourth Service Command, State Defense Council, box 57, ser. 419, RG 191, Florida State Archives, Tallahassee.

gency orders mandated: "All liquor stores, bars, dance halls, moving picture theaters and public places, where people may congregate have been ordered closed. The streets have been ordered cleared. . . . The congregation of more than three persons at any place is prohibited."⁴⁶

What had war wrought? In particular, what impact did the war have upon African Americans and race relations in Florida? World War II left a lasting military imprint on the state. Installations such as Camp Gordon Johnston, having served its usefulness, quickly returned to nature and developers. Dale Mabry Air Field surrendered its planes and personnel and became Tallahassee Community College.

Violence continued to pockmark MacDill Field, which now served the Cold War. A riot in October 1946 has been called by a leading military historian, "probably the largest riot the Air Force ever experienced."⁴⁷ Large numbers of African Americans complained that white troops received preferential discharges.⁴⁸ On the evening of October 27, 1946, a fight broke out at the Negro Non-commissioned Officers Club when young black soldiers attempted to enter a dance. White MPs fired into the crowd wounding a soldier. The black troops dispersed, reappearing at the white officers' quarters. Black soldiers chanted, "No more Jim Crow laws." Another crowd of 300 black soldiers marched upon the MacDill Avenue Gate, disarming an MP. The "mob" headed toward a well chosen target: the white-only, Gadsden housing project. Hurling stones and sticks, the black soldiers were repulsed by large numbers of civilian and military police. The chief of staff of the Strategic Air Command ordered an investigation of the "mutiny." The inquiry attributed the unrest to "communist" propaganda, which was brainwashing "the Negro soldiers to demand preference rather than equality." A black counterintelligence agent concluded that the problems stemmed from an appalling lack of opportunities and inferior segregated facilities. Nine GIs received long prison terms for the 1946 MacDill mutiny.⁴⁹

46. Ibid. Authorities declassified the files on January 22, 1993.

47. Alan L. Gropman, *The Air Force Integrates, 1945-1964* (Washington, 1978), 32.

48. *Chicago Defender*, April 27, 1946.

49. Gropman, *Air Force Integrates*, 64-70, 277-78; *Tampa Daily Times*, October 28-29, 1946; *Tampa Morning Tribune*, October 29, 1946; *St. Petersburg Times*, October 29, 1946; *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 11, February 8, 1947; Nalty, *Strength for the Fight*, 229-31, 245.

In 1941 accounts of a lynching near Quincy, Florida, created a national uproar. The *New York Times* commented, "Nothing that can happen in this country is better grist for the Nazi propaganda mill than a lynching."⁵⁰ Lynchings at Marianna and Live Oak in 1943 and 1944 brought national opprobrium to the Sunshine State, but nothing matched the outrage following the October 1945 lynching of Jesse James Payne in rural Madison County.⁵¹ The Payne tragedy was America's only lynching in 1945, though in many ways it was an anachronism. Lynching as a forum for white supremacy had lost favor since the 1930s. Yet Florida's legal system and political/economic establishment stood uncompromising in its defense of white supremacy in 1945.

Amidst the gloom of racial injustice, faith and optimism abounded. Ocala's the Reverend Edward T. Davis told a story about the war. The government had ordered all eligible men to report to their selective service stations. W. H. Long dutifully appeared at Howard Academy. An imperious white man looked at Long and remarked, "I see you don't love your country." The black man replied, "Oh, but I do love my country, but my country don't love me."⁵²

This tale speaks forcefully of signs of optimism for African Americans in the 1940s. Edward Davis epitomized the role of Florida's African American minister. In 1940 the census listed only nine black lawyers but 979 black clergy in Florida.⁵³ The war accelerated the civil rights movement in Florida, an inner struggle for democracy, in which many of the leaders came from the church. The church took a leading role in accepting visiting black servicemen into the community and spearheaded bond drives, socials, and fund raisers during the war. The Reverend Edward Davis also mediated between Ocala's black and white communities. For example, he reassured whites about "Eleanor clubs," whose members, at a

50. *New York Times* quoted in "Wartime Lynchings," *The Crisis* 48 (June 1941), 183.

51. Burran, "Racial Violence in the South During World War Two," 201; Jack E. Davis, "'Whitewash' in Florida: The Lynching of Jesse James Payne and its Aftermath," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 68 (January 1990), 277-98; *Tampa Daily Times*, June 17, 1943; *Pensacola Journal*, June 17, 18, 1943; "Wartime Lynchings"; *Tallahassee Daily Democrat*, August 25, 1944, *Atlanta Daily World*, October 13, 1945.

52. Edward D. Davis, *A Half Century of Struggle for Freedom in Florida* (Orlando, 1981), 163.

53. Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940. Population, Volume III*, 648.

given signal, would allegedly take fatal action against their employers.⁵⁴

Throughout the war, the Reverend Davis headed the Florida State Teachers' Association (FSTA), an organization for African American teachers. Historically, Florida's black teachers and students suffered grievous inequalities. During 1934-1935 Florida's white teachers earned an average salary of \$881, whereas black teachers earned only \$412. Expenditures reflected even greater racial disparities: in 1934-1935 Florida spent \$41 on every white student but only \$15 for each black student. In 1944-1945 Florida paid white teachers an average salary of \$1,757, while black teachers made \$1,174.55

Lawyers from the NAACP and FSTA joined with African Americans in the early 1940s in filing lawsuits against Dade, Duval, Escambia, Marion, Lake, Hillsborough, Pinellas, and Palm Beach counties. Thurgood Marshall argued many of these cases. By 1945 Florida's black teachers had triumphed in the courtroom; urban counties now paid teachers' salaries based on training and performance, not race. The price was steep. Almost all of the pioneer litigants— Harry T. Moore (Brevard), Noah W. Griffin (Pinellas), Mary Blocker (Duval), Charles H. Stebbins (Palm Beach), and the Reverend Edward T. Davis (Marion)— lost their teaching jobs because of their principled stands.⁵⁶

Following the teachers' pay cases, the U.S. Supreme Court issued its historic ruling, *Smith v. Allwright*, on April 4, 1944. The decision sounded the death knell for the white primary, which disfranchised African Americans from voting in the all-important primary election. White Floridians reacted hysterically. Governor Millard Caldwell asserted, "This new menace to the independence

54. Davis, *Half Century of Struggle for Freedom in Florida*, i, ii, 36, 133, 162; *Ocala Star-Banner*, September 19, 1943; *Pinellas Negro Weekly*, October 8, 1944.

55. Davis, *Half Century of Struggle for Freedom in Florida*, i, ii; Gilbert L. Porter and Leedell W. Neyland, *History of the Florida State Teachers Association* (Washington, 1977); J. Irving Scott, *The Education of Black People in Florida* (Philadelphia, 1974), 2-3, 64-80; *Papers of the NAACP*, pt. 3, ser. A, The Campaign for Educational Equality, 1913-1950, 24 rolls, see especially rolls 6 and 22; "Teachers Win Raise," *The Crisis* 50 (November 1942), 360; "Teacher's Salaries," *The Crisis* 49 (March 1942), 100; *Atlanta Daily World*, July 11, 26, 1942; February 3, April 9, May 18, 1943; *Biennial Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of the State of Florida, 1944-46* (Tallahassee, 1946), 118; *Biennial Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1936* (Tallahassee, 1936), 205-06.

56. *Atlanta Daily World*, May 18, 1943; Scott, *Education of Black People in Florida*, 64-80.

of the state and party must be resisted with well-directed energy.”⁵⁷ Senator Claude Pepper intoned, “Southerners will not allow matters peculiar to us to be determined by those who do not know and understand our problem. The South will allow nothing to impair white supremacy.”⁵⁸ The Smith decision emboldened the wartime crusade for democracy. African Americans prepared to participate in Florida politics on a new level, although the path was paved with more hurdles.⁵⁹

Connecting the bridges of wartime agitation by black soldiers, the battle for the ballot, and civil rights was Harry T. Moore. In 1944 Moore and other black leaders formed a new organization, the Progressive Voters' League, designed to mobilize African Americans. Moore served as executive secretary. As head of the Florida NAACP, he also helped double the state's chapters between 1941 and 1945. The war also activated the NAACP, as evidenced by the many letters from soldiers who enclosed membership dues. “I love my race and am willing to do anything I am called upon to do,” wrote Sergeant Edward S. Porter, upon receiving his NAACP membership. “It is particularly encouraging to note that the spirit of the NAACP has moved into such places as Perry, Gulf Hammock, Chapley [sic], Dixie County,” Moore announced in January 1946. In October 1944 Florida NAACP branches numbered thirty-three with a total of 2,850 members. By September 1945 the organization had grown to forty-eight branches and 7,226 members.⁶⁰

After the war Florida's African Americans pointed with justifiable pride to some tangible, hard-fought victories. For the first time in modern history blacks served on juries in Pinellas and Escambia

57. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, April 4, 1944; *Pensacola Journal*, April 4, 7, 8, 1944; *Bradenton Herald*, April 4, 1944.

58. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, April 5, 1944, *Miami Herald*, April 5, 1944; *Tampa Morning Tribune*, April 5, 1944; “Time Bomb,” *Time*, April 17, 1944, 20.

59. *Papers of the NAACP*, pt. 4, The Voting Rights Campaign, 1916-1950, 13 rolls, see especially rolls 6 and 7 for the torturous fight in which African Americans in Florida engaged to secure the franchise; Charles D. Farris, “Effects of Negro Voting Upon the Politics of the Southern City” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1953).

60. Caroline Emmons Poore, “Striking the First Blow: Harry T. Moore and the Fight for Black Equality in Florida,” (master's thesis, Florida State University, 1992); Harry T. Goore, “Development and Activities of NAACP in Florida During 1945,” *Tampa Florida Sentinel*, January 12, 1946; Edward S. Porter to NAACP, September 29, 1942, *Papers of the NAACP*, roll 13, 670-72.

counties and secured positions as policemen in Daytona, Deland, Miami, Sanford, and Tampa.⁶¹

World War II had introduced thousands of black soldiers to Florida and in turn dispatched Floridians to the world. Never before had Floridians been exposed to so many new people and ideas. A cross fertilization followed. Black servicemen helped disseminate new ideas and introduced a new militancy at the local and state levels. Black troops, especially individuals reared in the North, railed against Jim Crow. Ironically, the military's failure to provide recreational facilities for blacks forced African Americans to make contacts at churches, fraternal orders, and bars. James McGovern maintained that black servicemen in Pensacola "made a special contribution to the beginnings of significant social and political change among local blacks." The community, for example, organized the Pensacola Improvement Association in 1942, an institution involved in the fight for civil rights.⁶²

African Americans emerged from the war with a tempered resolve never again to accept discrimination without protest. Sergeant Willie L. Lawrence, a student from Florida A&M College, wrote an essay, "Will We Still Be Denied," in which he concluded, "Democracy wake up and do not deny me any longer."⁶³ Spencer Griffin, Jr.'s, 1944 poem, "Our Fortitude," appears in the only extant issue of the *Pinellas Negro Weekly*: "We of the so-called Minority race/ Have often been told to stay in our place/ Our place in the world is wherever we choose/ Be an upright citizen we have nothing to lose."⁶⁴ Such individuals formed the new ranks of the civil rights movement nurtured by the war and the local, national, and

61. James R. McGovern, *The Emergence of a City in the Modern South: Pensacola, 1900-1949* (DeLeon Springs, FL, 1976), 167; *Pensacola Journal*, May 15, 1943; *Tampa Daily Times*, December 2, 1941; *St. Petersburg Times*, December 2, 1941, July 21, 1947; *Tampa Morning Tribune*, February 10, 1944; *Pittsburgh Courier*; November 27, 1943, December 9, 1944, May 17, 1945; Council of Social Agencies, *Jacksonville Looks at its Negro Community: A Survey of Conditions Affecting the Negro Population in Jacksonville and Duval County, Florida* (Jacksonville, 1946), 84; *Atlanta Daily World*, August 27, 1942.

62. McGovern, *Emergence of a City in the Modern South*, 167. See also *St. Petersburg Times*, September 26, 1943; *Ocala Star-Banner*; September 19, 1943; *Tampa Daily Times*, June 26, 1943; *Cocoa Tribune*, January 21, 1943; *Tampa Morning Tribune*, April 15, 1944.

63. Willie L. Lawrence to White, October 3, 1943, *Papers of the NAACP*, roll 12, 806-07.

64. *Pinellas Negro Weekly*, October 8, 1944. Griffin was incinerator foreman at MacDill Air Field.

international forces for change that emanated from the conflict. The Second World War served as a seedbed for the modern civil rights movement.



African American soldiers during a drill at MacDill Field. Photograph reproduced from *Thunderbird: MacDill Field Quarterly* 1 (April 1943).