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Thomas Reilly

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Florida's Flying Minute Men: The Civil Air Patrol, 1941-1943

by THOMAS REILLY

As the United States teetered on the brink of war, many worried that the country was woefully unprepared to defend its own shores. Several prominent Americans developed the idea of a civilian defense force to patrol the offshore waters of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and the Gulf of Mexico. A committee headed by Gill Robb Wilson, National Aeronautic Association president and aviation editor for the New York *Herald Tribune*, presented a Civil Air Patrol (CAP) plan to Fiorello H. LaGuardia, director of the United States Civilian Defense, mayor of New York City, and World War I flyer. Unlike many of his civilian and military counterparts, LaGuardia took seriously the threat of German submarines, once telling a *New York Times* reporter that “[w]e’ve got to hustle and provide our forces with everything they need so they can end the menace as soon as possible.”¹

From the earliest stages of planning, lower-ranking officers of the army air forces had given only half-hearted support to the role of the Civil Air Patrol. The navy was even less supportive. On March 4, 1942, representatives of the Tanker Committee of the Petroleum War Council suggested the navy authorize the use of Civil Air Patrol aircraft to patrol sea-lanes. Major General Carl Spaatz of the army air forces was warm to the idea; Admiral Ernest J. Ring, the Atlantic Fleet commander, was not. In fact, Rear Admiral Donald B. Duncan, assistant chief of staff, claimed CAP was “a scheme promoted by the builder[s] of pleasure aircraft” interested in selling more airplanes. Rear Admiral Richard S. Edwards, deputy chief of staff for operations, believed the Civil Air Patrol would “serve no useful purpose except to give merchant ships the illusion that an

Thomas Reilly is an aviation consultant with over twenty-five years experience in the airline industry. He is the author of *Jannus, An American Flier* (Gainesville, 1997).

1. Ladislav Farago, *The Tenth Fleet* (New York, 1962), 13.

adequate air patrol is being maintained” and that “lost amateur flyers will require the use of anti-sub vessels to look for them.”²

The navy’s opposition to the Civil Air Patrol stemmed from inter-branch conflict dating back to 1921 when Colonel William F. Mitchell embarrassed the navy by proving that airpower was more than capable of destroying armor-plated sea-going warships. Furthermore, as Ladislas Farago pointed out in *The Tenth Fleet*, “[s]ince the U-boat was, for all practical purposes, an integral part of the war at sea, the Navy took it for granted that overall jurisdiction should be vested in it.”³ Finally, the army air forces and the navy had far different approaches to the German submarine threat. According to Farago, Admiral Ernest Ring and the navy “had a preventive approach to the problem, concentrating on the protection of convoys and leaving offensive action to escort vessels, mostly when the U-boats mounted their attacks. The Air Force thought this approach far too defensive, if not defeatist. It advocated an offensive approach to seek out and attack the U-boats wherever they were and destroy them before they could attack.”⁴

Bringing the CAP to life was not an easy task. *The Sportsman Pilot* opined that “[o]fficial indifferences and the good old Army game prevented anything concrete from happening. . . .”⁵ Fortunately, General Henry H. Arnold did not share that view and appointed a board to study the proposal. Headed by Brigadier General George E. Stratemeyer, the board was comprised of Colonel Harry H. Blee, Major Lucius P. Ordway Jr., and Major Alexis B. McMullen, the former director of Florida’s state aviation department. The board unanimously embraced the idea of the CAP. The farsighted General Arnold undoubtedly deserves much of the credit for the Civil Air Patrol. *U.S. Air Services* reported that “many officers of the Army and Navy were inclined to look askance at these civilian airmen in their put-puts and wanted to ground them for the duration.”⁶

The prototype for the Civil Air Patrol was the New Jersey Civil Air Defense Services, an organization that had been developed by Gill Robb Wilson. It used New Jersey’s civil aviation fleet for “liaison

2. Michael Gannon, *Operation Drumbeat* (New York, 1990), 355-56.

3. Farago, *The Tenth Fleet*, 102.

4. *Ibid.*, 103.

5. *The Sportsman Pilot*, January 15, 1942, 22.

6. *U.S. Air Services*, March 1943, 18.

work and for patrolling uninhabited stretches of coastline as well as [for] enhancing security measures for protecting vital installations such as dams, aqueducts and pipelines."⁷ In the late 1930s and early 1940s other states developed their own civil air defense systems, as did the Airplane Owners and Pilots Association.⁸

The 1st Air Squadron, Florida Defense Force officially came into being on May 28, 1941, when Brigadier General Vivien Collins mustered the outfit at Morrison Field in West Palm Beach. According to General Collins, the mission of the outfit was to "be the first unit called in case of trouble anywhere— to transport riot equipment from the State Arsenal at St. Augustine to any point in the state where the local infantry company may need it." In August, Florida's lawmakers passed legislation making provisions for "the use of volunteers for home defense during the entire period the Florida National Guard is on active Army duty."⁹ Wright "Ike" Vermilya Jr. was appointed head of the 1st Air Squadron, Florida Defense Force on May 28, 1941, and by November, the group claimed at least a dozen airplanes, twenty-six officers, and forty-one enlisted men.¹⁰ The State Defense Council was chaired by Governor Spessard L. Holland; George L. Burr Jr. was appointed executive director, and Brigadier General Collins, adjutant general of Florida, served as the overall commander, Vermilya reported to General Collins, and Collins reported to Governor Holland.¹¹

During a recruiting trip to Miami in November, Vermilya signed up fifty-five pilots with fifty-four airplanes. A recently organized Miami squadron boasted men and women from the ten surrounding counties. Vermilya claimed "the squadron would not be used for combat, but would work as observers for transportation and communications in case of emergency."¹²

Captain Vermilya had been working on Florida's civil air defense organization long before it had been formally recognized. Vermilya was the perfect man for the job; he was an experienced aviator, a longtime fixed base operator, and a former member of the Arkansas National Guard. Equally important, he had the re-

7. Frank A. Burnham, *Hero Next Door* (Fallbrook, Calif., 1977), 23.

8. *Miami Herald*, November 9, 1941.

9. *The Sportsman Pilot*, August 15, 1941, 12.

10. *Miami Herald*, November 5, 1941.

11. *Palm Beach Times*, November 23, 1941.

12. *Miami Herald*, November 6, 1941.



Brigadier General Vivien Collins addresses members of the 1st Air Squadron, Florida Defense Force on May 28, 1941. *Photograph courtesy of Thomas Reilly, Safety Harbor, Florida.*

spect of most civilian fliers in Florida and was nearly as well known as the governor.¹³

13. *Palm Beach Times*, November 23, 1941.

Florida's civilian air force was originally organized on a ninety-day basis. When it proved successful, the operation was extended. Strictly a volunteer organization, three-year enlistments were required. The men were not paid for their service unless their squadron was called to active duty. The state of Florida provided uniforms and weapons. Training was similar in scope to that received by the men of the National Guard. Each week the enlisted men drilled in military procedures. All flight officers and many enlisted men also received radio instruction.¹⁴

All officers were sworn in as first lieutenants, except for Wright Vermilya and the squadron's medical officer, who were commissioned as captains. Requirements for enlistment were few: all officers had to be licensed pilots or have at least a year of prior military service. The initial organization called for twenty-six commissioned officers, twenty-one noncommissioned officers, and twenty privates. The fleet of aircraft included Stinsons, Cubs, Voyagers, Cessnas, Fairchilds, Aeroncas, Grumman Widgeons, and two Grumman G-21 amphibians capable of speeds of two hundred miles an hour. The nose of each airplane bore the legend "1st Air Squadron, Florida Defense Force."¹⁵

After the outbreak of war in Europe in 1939, many American publications made a concerted effort to remain neutral. Others did not and called for preparedness. *The Sportsman Pilot* recommended a civilian air force to augment the army. "There is a list of services that can be performed by non-scheduled pilots and aircraft during all phases of a national emergency—from the less serious to the most critical," the editors wrote. "These services can be most effective when organized, probably along military or semi-military lines. Such a set-up will automatically make the participating non-scheduled planes and pilots recognized officially as essential to the welfare of the nation and will thus guarantee better than anything yet proposed the preservation of the fundamental structure of our great non-scheduled aviation activity for the nation's service now and of course, in the post-emergency period, when expansion will exceed even the fondest dreams—provided the goose that lays the golden egg is protected now."¹⁶

14. *Palm Beach Times*, November 23, 1941.

15. *Palm Beach Post*, November 23, 1941.

16. *The Sportsman Pilot*, November 15, 1941, 5.

The Civil Air Patrol began operations on December 1, 1941, only a few days prior to the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. Only one month earlier, off the coast of Iceland, a German U-boat had picked off the American destroyer *Reuben James*. The Nazis had been patrolling the sea lanes of the Atlantic with near impunity. Merchant marine vessels were easy pickings. U.S. Navy ships did not present much more of a challenge; the two-thousand-ton *Reuben James* had been armed with four four-inch guns, anti-aircraft batteries, depth charge racks, and torpedo tubes. Ninety-nine men were lost. Germany immediately claimed responsibility for the sinking. A German official reported that "the Germans were fully within their rights, and responsibility lies on Roosevelt's shoulders."¹⁷

The Germans had prepared for America's entry into the war long before December 1941. Their submarines had secretly patrolled thousands of miles from Canada south along the East Coast, throughout the Gulf of Mexico, and along the Gulf coast. They were well prepared to wreak havoc on domestic and foreign civil shipping as well as on military ocean-going vessels. Florida, with its hundreds of miles of coastline, was especially vulnerable. When war struck, the American navy was as unprepared to defend its shores as its air forces had been at the start of the First World War. As Frank A. Burnham has noted, the meager force protecting American shipping included "a handful of antiquated subchasers, five old Eagle boats, three ocean-going yachts pressed into military service, less than a dozen Coast Guard vessels, four blimps and an occasional airplane."¹⁸

Between January and December 1942, forty-three allied tankers were lost on the U.S. eastern seaboard; nine of these were sunk off Florida. Many people called for blackouts and argued that the bright lights of Florida's coastal cities made perfect backdrops for the captains of the German submarines. It was their belief that Allied ships were silhouetted against the city lights.

The call for blackouts was not, however, unanimous. For the most part, east coast Florida resort owners, civil defense authorities, and mayors argued against them. They believed that blackouts and dimouts were not necessary and would prove hazardous to the economy and lead to an increase in crime. The latter group was

17. *Miami Herald*, November 1, 1941.

18. Burnham, *Hero Next Door*, 24-25.

probably correct in their opposition to blackouts. Historian Clay Blair points out that “[o]nly rarely were moon, weather, and tactical conditions such that distant shorelines were advantageous to the very few German U-boats operating in Florida waters.”¹⁹

Without a doubt, the German submarines had to be checked. Had the German U-boats not been contained, the American war effort would have been greatly compromised. Oil supplies would have been diminished, valuable civilian and military ships destroyed, and American lives lost. The negative psychological implications of German submarines attacking with near-impunity would have been devastating. Fortunately, Admiral Ernest King came around and authorized the use of armed small aircraft flown by Civil Air Patrol pilots over the heaviest offshore Atlantic sea-lanes.²⁰

Within days after Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor, the Civil Aeronautics Administration temporarily suspended the licenses of all private pilots. Each flyer was required to furnish proof of United States citizenship by presenting either a birth certificate or third-class radio license. Once verified, licenses were countersigned and returned to flyers.²¹

Private flyers were strongly encouraged to join either the military or the Civil Air Patrol if they had any hope of flying during the duration of the war. There were obvious concerns regarding gasoline rationing; perhaps more important were security issues. The sheer number of military training flights being undertaken endangered civilian flyers. Armed military planes ensured that no unauthorized flights were made over secret or sensitive areas. Reed Landis, Aviation Aide to LaGuardia, said, “If you are making an unauthorized flight over some restricted area, don’t worry about having your license revoked, or that you may be fined or jailed . . . you may be shot down.”²²

LaGuardia appointed Major General John F. Curry of the army air forces the first national commander of the Civil Air Patrol.²³ Gill Robb Wilson was named executive director, reporting to General Curry. The aviation planning staff of the Civil Air Patrol included several prominent Floridians such as A. B. McMullen and Harry

19. Clay Blair, *Hitler's U-bout War* (New York, 1996), 500.

20. Gannon, *Operation Drumbeat*, 179.

21. *Palm Beach Post*, January 12, 1942.

22. *U.S. Air Service*, February 1942, 34.

23. *Aviation Magazine*, January 1942, 146.

Playford of St. Petersburg. The objective of the CAP was to guard thousands of miles of coastline and protect essential shipping from the German submarines that menaced the entire length of the Atlantic and Gulf coasts.²⁴

A Civil Air Patrol wing was organized in each state.²⁵ On December 10, 1941, Fiorello LaGuardia announced that Wright Vermilya, already in charge of Florida's civil air defense, was to be the CAP wing commander for the state.²⁶ The state's 1st Air Squadron was easily melded into a CAP unit. Vermilya and his group had been planning for just such an occurrence for many months. Cecil Z. Cornelius of West Palm Beach, John L. Gresham of Daytona Beach, Peter J. Sones of Haines City, Laurie Yonge of Jacksonville, and Arthur Corry of Quincy served as trusted advisors to Vermilya and assisted him in developing staff arrangements. Staff officers under the wing commander included adjutant and officers in charge of personnel and medical, intelligence and public relations, training and operations, equipment and supplies, transportation, and communications. By early January 1942, Vermilya had organized his Florida wing into seven operational groups, each with a commander and staff.²⁷

The CAP was set up on a regional basis to be aligned with the nine army air forces areas within the United States. The bureaucracy which controlled the coastal patrol units was frequently cumbersome. While technically under the direction of the army, the commanders of coastal patrol units actually received their orders from the navy's Eastern Sea Frontier headquartered in New York City.²⁸

Those eligible to serve in the CAP included "any citizen pilot of good character, certified by the CAA in the grade of Private pilot or higher grade [and] any citizen of good character, holding a government certificate for any skill or experience related to aviation, such as aircraft and engine mechanic, control tower operator, radio telephone operator. . . ." Persons interested in CAP auxiliary duty could "volunteer for clerical work, driving of cars or ambulances, watchman, first-aid instruction or kindred service"; and

24. *Palm Beach Post*, January 12, 1942.

25. *Civil Air Patrol Handbook* (Dallas, 1942).

26. *Palm Beach Post*, December 11, 1941.

27. *Ibid.*, January 4, 1942.

28. *US. Air Services*, March 1943, 18.

those eligible for CAP apprentice duty included any like citizen "who will undertake mechanic, airport supervision, control tower or other instruction under the training program of the CAP" The minimum age for service was sixteen. No one under eighteen was accepted for flight duty. Women were encouraged to apply and made up a large segment of the Civil Air Patrol.²⁹

While women were not necessarily treated as equals, once they proved their mettle, they were generally accepted. Initially, women were not allowed to fly; that later changed. From the very beginning, Major General Curry attempted to make the female volunteers welcome. "There must be no doubt in the minds of our gallant fliers that they are needed and, in my opinion, indispensable to the full success of the CAP," Curry declared. "A great part of the program made in organizing civilian aviation under the Civil Air Patrol has been due to the volunteer help given by female fliers-members of the Ninety-Niners and the Women Flyers of America."³⁰ Florida's own Jacqueline Cochran, future commander of the WASPS, was a member of the CAP Enlistment of a woman of Cochran's stature went a long way toward giving female aviators credibility.³¹ By June of 1943, the Civil Air Patrol claimed a membership of 75,000; ten percent were women.³²

At the outset of the war, CAP received over one thousand applications. Demand for enlistment in the Civil Air Patrol was so heavy that the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the national CAP headquarters could not handle the flood of paperwork. *Aviation Magazine* advised those pilots interested in joining CAP to "get an application blank from a CAA office, a state aviation officer, or an airplane dealer, now or soon. File a fingerprint card with it, and send a 1½ inch by 1½ inch photo. Then, don't telephone Washington, and don't write to the government. And don't come to Washington; there are no rooms to be had."³³

By the end of the first year of Civil Air Patrol operations there were over 65,000 CAP volunteers at more than one thousand air-

29. United States Office of Civilian Defense, *Civil Air Patrol Organization, Purpose, Program, Enlistment* (Washington, D. C., n.d.), 6.

30. Quoted in Robert E. Neprud. *Flying Minute Men, The Story of Civil Air Patrol* (New York, 1948), 17.

31. *Ibid.*

32. Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II, Volume I, The Battle of the Atlantic, September 1939-May 1943* (Boston, 1947), 278.

33. *Aviation Magazine*, January 1942, 146.

ports throughout the United States. Major General Earle E. Johnson wrote: "The most spectacular work is on the Coastal Patrol which began to operate early in the year when the Axis was taking heavy toll of American tankers and merchant vessels on the vital supply routes along our shores."³⁴

In many respects, the flying operations of the Civil Air Patrol were every bit as important, and often as confidential, as those of the army air forces. On March 6, 1942, the Office of Civilian Defense advised aviation writers that "in covering operations of the Civil Air Patrol, all members of the press [must] observe the same rules in protecting military secrecy as are applied to stories about Army and Navy operations."³⁵

Three bases were originally charted for Operation— Atlantic City, New Jersey; Rehoboth, Delaware; and West Palm Beach, Florida. The sites of the first three Civil Air Patrol bases had been chosen for good reason: they were located near deep water and major ocean-going shipping lanes. Thus, they were prime locations for German submarines preying on defenseless merchant marine vessels. It had become open warfare on ships. In May 1942 alone, the *S. S. Eclipse*, *S. S. DeLisle*, *S. S. Amazone*, *S. S. Java Arrow*, and *S. S. Halsey* had all been sunk within two days by German torpedoes. The bases at Atlantic City and Rehoboth were scheduled to open first. If they proved successful, the base at West Palm Beach would be activated. An \$18,000 grant covered the ninety-day trial for the three bases. Funds were extremely tight. CAP volunteers received no salary and were responsible for their own expenses. When on army-ordered missions, members received eight dollars per day. Eventually owners of aircraft received "a moderate rental, varying with horsepower. . . paid for planes per hour per flight."³⁶

West Palm Beach, Base Number 3 at Morrison Field became operational on March 30, 1942. The army quickly took over the airfield, filling the runways and parking ramps with sleek fighter planes and heavy bombers.³⁷ When traffic from army aircraft proved to be too heavy, Major Vermilya moved his operation to

34. *Ibid.*, December 1942, 251.

35. Kendall K. Hoyt to all aviation writers, March 6, 1942, Civil Air Patrol folder 1, Smithsonian Institution National Air and Space Museum, Washington, D.C.

36. "The Civil Air Patrol Patriotic Service of Great Value," speech of Honorable Hatton W. Summers of Texas in the House of Representatives, January 28, 1943, p. 5, Civil Air Patrol folder 1.

37. *Palm Beach Post*, March 18, 1942.

nearby Lantana. The Lantana facilities were crude. Eight portable canvas hangars, each capable of housing one airplane, were erected. Maintenance work was performed outside.³⁸

The CAP fleet consisted of privately owned single-engine Fairchild, Stinson, Beechcraft, Waco, and Grumman Widgeon aircraft. The equipment was old and frequently seemed incapable of flight. Henry McLemore, a newspaper columnist, told of a flight with CAP pilots:

The two CAP captains brought me down in a ship that looked as if it were on lend-lease from the Smithsonian Institution. I would not be at all surprised, in fact, if its motor wasn't stolen from Eli Whitney's cotton gin. Yet this crate, this fugitive from a salvage drive, is the pride of the coastal patrol base from which they operate.

We took off from a military base and the kids there couldn't help but laugh as we taxied to the line between rows of modern dive-bombers and pursuit planes. The air-speed indicator showed 80 miles per hour as we were airborne and 210 when we cleared a pine thicket so closely that I could have robbed a sparrow's nest had I chosen to. Captain Mosely was at the controls and Captain Keil at the repairs. Keil tied some mysterious strings together, put on some earphones that didn't work, and manually held a ventilator closed. It was the only plane I was ever in that underwent repairs while taxiing to take off.³⁹

In March 1942, the government worked out a deal that allowed owners of aircraft used in CAP missions to buy liability and property damage insurance. Underwritten by several companies, a \$100,000 policy carried a six-month premium of less than \$15. The policy had several exclusions and did not cover "any liability in respect of bodily injuries or in respect of damage to or destruction of property resulting from or arising consequences of: the act of any enemy of the United States; the approved aircraft or its occupants being shot at or bombed by any persons whatsoever; or the partici-

38. C. Y. Nanney Jr., *The History of the CAP Coastal Patrol Base No. 5* (Daytona Beach, 1943), 16.

39. Quoted in Neprud, *Flying Minute Men*, 17.

pation of the approved aircraft or its occupants in actual hostilities.⁴⁰

Any available civilian airplane was pressed into service. At first the single-engined aircraft carried no bombs or guns. Eventually the planes were outfitted with jury-rigged three-hundred and twenty-five-pound depth charges or two one-hundred-pound demolition bombs. CAP eventually developed a bomb rack that could “carry two demolition and two smoke bombs (for marking sub locations) operated by a lever on the floor. The bombsight, hung outside the window[,] was effective up to 3,000 feet and is made of materials worth only 20¢.”⁴¹

A Floridian by desire, not birth, Zack Mosley and his brain-child, the cartoon strip *Smilin’ Jack*, undoubtedly did a great deal to publicize the Civil Air Patrol. Mosley, himself a member of the CAP at West Palm Beach, flew during the day and drew his strip at night. The commanding officer at the Lantana Field permitted him to construct a small studio on top of one of the hangars.⁴² Mosley, who eventually became the third wing commander from Florida, was seldom far from the action.

In fact, Zack Mosley claimed that Ike Vermilya was responsible for the arming of the small CAP airplanes. Mosley recalled that after two West Palm Beach pilots had located a German submarine sitting on a sandbar in the Atlantic near Cape Canaveral in 1942, they radioed their finding to Vermilya, who promptly made phone calls to the bases at Tampa and the Banana River Naval Air Station for an airplane equipped with bombs. No luck. By the time a depth-charge-equipped bomber was located at the Jacksonville Naval Air Station and flown south, the tide had come in and the submarine had escaped. Vermilya telephoned General Arnold with his disappointing report. Arnold ordered Vermilya to “start gettin’ those little Civil Air Patrol planes armed with bombs, even if you have to throw th’ damned bombs outa’ th’ WINDOWS!”⁴³

Cruising only a few hundred feet above the water, the pilots flew as far as fifty to sixty miles offshore. Dawn to dusk, the CAP pilots patrolled the shipping lanes searching for German subma-

40. Aero Insurance Underwriters, Associated Underwriters, United States Aviation Underwriters Insurance for Civil Air Patrol Public Liability and Property Damage Advertisement, March 1942, Civil Air Patrol folder 1.

41. *Time*, January 25, 1943, 19.

42. Zack T. Mosley, *Brave Coward Zack* (St. Petersburg, 1976), 50.

43. *Ibid.*, 55.

rines. The German U-boat commanders referred to the CAP airplanes as “yellow bugs.”⁴⁴

Conditions were difficult and accidents were not uncommon. Single-engine airplanes were pushed to their limits; maintenance procedures were in large part undertaken by civilian volunteers with rudimentary training. Men and women lost their lives— ninety aircraft went down with twenty-six fatalities and seven serious injuries.⁴⁵ Fortunately many of the pilots did survive. One such episode is reflected in the story of Pilot Wiley R. Reynolds and his observer, Lieutenant R. J. Cohn, members of Base Number 3, who encountered difficulty on July 11, 1943, while on a routine mission over the Atlantic Ocean near Lantana:

[The] [e]ngine started missing and losing power at about 1500 ft. Dropped a couple of smoke flares to get wind direction. Saw small craft below and circled near. Occupants of craft signaled us to drop our 100 lb. demolition bomb safe. As I got closer to the water I pulled on full flaps, shut off ignition and hauled back on controls. Ocean was calm. Plane nosed over, then settled back to float about 8 minutes before sinking in 150 ft. of water. Landing craft picked us up in about 5 minutes. My observer, who did not know how to swim, kept cool, inflated his one man raft and held on to plane wing and raft. I opened door on left side and swam around to my observer. All this time my cousin, Harry Bassett and Alex Thomson was circling in a companion plane calling base but could not be heard at Lantana due to local thunderstorms. We arrived in Fort Pierce about an hour later.⁴⁶

Following their rescue, Reynolds and Cohn were inducted into the “Duck Club.” Founded by Colonel L. A. “Jack” Vilas, the Duck Club honored those CAP pilots involved in crashes. A red duck sitting upon the water, floating on a series of blue wavy lines, superimposed on the blue Civil Air Patrol disc became the insignia awarded to those fortunate enough to survive water crashes. A total of 112

44. Neprud, *Flying Minute Men*, 46.

45. Civil Air Patrol, Civil Air Patrol Operations Report, September 3, 1943, Civil Air Patrol folder 1.

46. Wiley R. Reynolds to Lester E. Hopper, 1943, Civil Air Patrol folder 1.

CAP members received the Duck Club award, the majority represented by pilots and observers serving at Florida bases.⁴⁷

Julius L. Gresham of Daytona Beach volunteered for duty in the CAP only days before Pearl Harbor. Well qualified for service, he had attended Horner Military Academy in Charlotte, North Carolina. A Marine Corps veteran, Gresham had served in Santo Domingo for eighteen months. Owner of a successful automobile dealership in Daytona Beach, Gresham possessed an important asset: an airplane. Like many Floridians, Gresham had served with Wright Vermilya at West Palm Beach as a member of the 1st Air Squadron, Florida Defense Force.⁴⁸

On May 1, 1942, Major General Earle Johnson, Colonel Harry H. Blee, and Major General George Noland inspected the West Palm Beach operation. Pleased with what they saw, they concluded that Florida needed more bases. On May 12, Gresham received orders to activate a base at Daytona Beach. He was not given much time. Vermilya wanted the Daytona Beach operation up and running by May 18.⁴⁹

Almost immediately, Gresham and Lawrence W. Grabe headed to Daytona Beach. They were forced to start from scratch. Daytona Beach Municipal Airport offered paved runways but little else. There were no suitable buildings or radio equipment. The fleet included a Stinson 105 owned by Gresham, Grabe's Luscombe, and an Aeronca Chief owned by the Daytona Beach Aero Club. There was no funding for the operation. Men and women came from all over Florida and throughout the United States to serve in the Daytona Beach CAP. North Carolina, Ohio, Alabama, Louisiana, Georgia, Tennessee, Kansas, Maine, New York, Kentucky, and Connecticut were well represented.⁵⁰

Personal funds of members of the CAP were pooled and the city of Daytona Beach agreed to a loan. Several dilapidated buildings left over from a Works Progress Administration project were carefully torn down, then reassembled near the sole airport hangar. Civil Air Patrol volunteers erected a headquarters, as well as radio, maintenance, weather, and engineering shops. Their meager

47. Colonel Lester E. Hopper, *Civil Air Patrol Historical Monograph Number One, An In-Depth Study of Civil Air Patrol's Duck Club Membership* (Washington, D. C., 1984), 10.

48. Nanney, *The History of the CAP Coastal Patrol Base No. 5*, 11.

49. *Ibid.*

50. *Ibid.*, 25-27.

funds went toward the acquisition of telephones, radios, and furniture. Tents were erected on the flight line and equipped with cots for the use of pilots between flights.⁵¹

The local chapter of the Red Cross directed by Helen Meeker and Lucille Prettyman offered its assistance to Gresham. Red Cross workers quickly set up a canteen that sold sandwiches, coffee, and cigarettes. The canteen opened at 4:30 a.m. and remained open until late in the night.⁵²

In a period of only one week, Gresham pulled together his executive and operations staffs. Robert Boynton, operator of a flying service at the Daytona Beach Airport, became operations officer; Clarence Simpson was his assistant. Larry Grabe, whose civilian experience was in the dry cleaning business, became the intelligence officer. Larry Schmarje became the engineering officer; John Ragland, manager of the Daytona Airport, was named the airdrome officer; and Areal C. Sage, an employee of the Florida Bank and Trust, served as head of administration.⁵³

As the men filtered in, the base's fleet of airplanes grew. Albert M. Crabtree flew in with his Ranger Fairchild. Ben Handler owned a Waco C-6, Isaac Beatty a Warner Fairchild, H. D. Clinton a Culver Cadet, A. W. Stone a Monocoupe, June Horner a Ranger Fairchild, and Erskine Boyce a Waco.⁵⁴

May 19, the target date for the base's first mission, came and went. Crews were determined for a mission to be flown on May 20. At noon, Julius Gresham scribbled the day's mission on the mission board. Albert Crabtree and David Booher, serving as pilot and observer respectively, were scheduled to fly Crabtree's Fairchild on the base's first mission at 1:30 p.m. Gresham had determined that each flight would be assigned a fruit as its code name. Lime was to be the code name of Crabtree's first flight. Crabtree remarked that he hoped "the flight wouldn't be as sour as the fruit it represented."⁵⁵ Harry Clinton as pilot and Ed Walton as observer were scheduled for a mission at 1:34 p.m.; Bill Tyree and Bill Chastaine would take off at 1:40 p.m.; and Ben Handler and Shelburne Carter were scheduled for a 3:00 p.m. mission to Melbourne.⁵⁶

51. *Ibid.*, 11.

52. *Ibid.*, 12.

53. *Ibid.*

54. *Ibid.*, 25-27.

55. *Ibid.*, 9.

56. *Ibid.*, 12-13.

Larry Grabe, Julius Gresham, Bob Boynton, and Clarence Simpson briefed the pilots and observers. Following their briefing, the pilots inspected their airplanes. At exactly 1:30 p.m., with little fanfare, Crabtree's Ranger Fairchild lifted off the runway of the Daytona Beach airport and Civil Air Patrol Coastal Patrol Base Number 5 was in business.⁵⁷

From that point on, the base became responsible for almost uninterrupted anti-submarine patrols. German submarine, or "pig-boat," activity was especially heavy off Daytona Beach. Commander Gresham's pilots did everything in their power to keep a two-hundred-mile area of the coast clear. The base's pilots patrolled the area from Jacksonville to Melbourne. Gresham recalled, "We were in the most sub-infested territory to be found anywhere."⁵⁸ Each day, Gresham's pilots flew more than sixty-five hours of patrol missions. Regular routes included a dawn mission to Melbourne, and 1:00 p.m. and 3:00 p.m. patrols of the Jacksonville and Melbourne sectors. Each day the army and navy made special requests.⁵⁹

Ultimately a total of thirty-nine airplanes were assigned to the base. Accidents were a routine part of daily life. Three aircraft were lost at sea, four were damaged in major ground accidents, and another three were damaged in minor ground accidents.⁶⁰

At a few minutes after 2:00 p.m. on October 28, 1942, while on a routine patrol a few miles off the coast and northeast of St. Augustine, the engine of Albert Crabtree's Ranger Fairchild died, forcing Crabtree to make an in-the-water crash landing. Neither Crabtree nor Lieutenant Francis McLaughlin, his observer, were injured. After floating in the rough waters of the Atlantic Ocean for nearly two hours, they were picked up by the Coast Guard.⁶¹

Less than a month later, another of the base's pilots was forced to crash land at sea. On November 22, while on a patrol fifteen miles east of Daytona Beach, the engine of Lieutenant Lew Rhodes' aircraft suddenly cut out. After crashing, the airplane (owned by Gresham) floated for eight minutes then sank. Rhodes and Lieutenant Gates Clay floated helplessly in the Atlantic Ocean

57. *Ibid.*, 13.

58. Neprud, *Flying Minute Men*, 36.

59. Nanney, *The History of the CAP Coastal Patrol Base No. 5*, 17.

60. *Ibid.*, 25-27.

61. *Ibid.*, 28.

for an hour and a half until they were rescued by a navy PBY patrol bomber.⁶²

A second airplane owned by Albert Crabtree was lost at sea on February 2, 1943. Lieutenants Wesley C. Wallace and Robert Wimp had flown Crabtree's Stinson Voyager nine miles northeast of Matanzas. Suddenly they experienced engine failure and were forced to ditch in the ocean. Forty minutes after their crash, they were rescued by a passing freighter. The freighter later rendezvoused with a navy crash boat and the two CAP officers were returned to Flagler Beach.⁶³

On October 1, 1942, Gresham was ordered to move his base to Flagler Beach. Within three weeks, the changeover had been effected, and operations began on October 28. The new base was a major improvement over the Daytona Beach facility. It sported a six-plane hangar, a pilot's lounge, and offices for operations, intelligence, administration, the officer of the day, and the commanding officer. A radio shack complete with a pair of transmitters sat atop the administration building.⁶⁴

Most of the data on Florida's Civil Air Patrol activities during this period was considered restricted military information. Unfortunately, details of the day-to-day missions and patrols and encounters with the German "pigboats" are not available. What is known, however, is that from May 19, 1942, through August 31, 1943, 127 men and women served at CAP Coastal Patrol Base Number 5. They suffered no fatalities, and CAP pilots flew in excess of 17,000 hours of operational missions equalling approximately 1.7 million air miles.⁶⁵

In July 1942, Pete Sones was named full-time base commander at the Civil Air Patrol's Coastal Patrol Station Number 13. Activated on July 9, 1942, the base commenced its operation at Tampa's Peter O. Knight Airport. Its initial mission was to perform search and rescue missions for the aircraft flying from the numerous bases in the Tampa Bay area. Pilots from Base 13 took part in frequent simulated bombing attacks designed to teach citizens how to react in the event of German air raids. On one such mission, a fleet of thirty-five Civil Air Patrol airplanes attacked Tampa. The small

62. *Ibid.*

63. *Ibid.*

64. *Ibid.*, 16.

65. *Ibid.*, 18.



Peter J. Sones of Haines City, Florida, served as commander of the CAP's Coastal Patrol Station Number 13 at Sarasota. Sones received the Exceptional Civilian Service Medal for his service. *Photograph courtesy of Thomas Reilly, Safety Harbor, Florida.*

planes bearing the emblem of a red three-bladed propeller with a white triangle on a blue disc dropped several thousand flour-filled paper bombs.⁶⁶

When German submarines began their movement into the Gulf of Mexico, several CAP bases were already established at Gulf coast cities, including Panama City and Sarasota.⁶⁷ When its mission was revised to that of coastal watch, the base at Tampa was relo-

66. Lynn M. Homan and Thomas Reilly, *Pete Sones: Racing the Wind* (St. Petersburg, 1996), 46.

67. Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II, Volume I*, 279.

cated to Sarasota and headquartered at the municipal airport. Men and women from Orlando comprised the majority of Sones' command. Its first patrol operation was August 7, 1942. Command meant more than giving orders and pushing paper; Sones flew as often as possible. In a period of one year, he flew thirty missions totaling 125 hours using a Stinson Voyager, Stinson Reliant, and a Fairchild.⁶⁸

While Sones was on active duty in Sarasota, his wife was doing her part for the war effort back in Haines City. As a member of the local civil defense observation team, Eleanor Sones spent many hours on the roof of the Hotel Polk scanning the skies for enemy aircraft.⁶⁹

Pete Sones left the CAP in October 1943 with the rank of major. The average loss per CAP base during the war was one and one-half men. Under Major Sones' command, Base Number 13 had no serious casualties and no fatalities in approximately eleven thousand flight hours. Twenty-four men under Sones' command received air medals for meritorious achievement.⁷⁰

Obviously not everyone applying for enlistment in the CAP was experienced, and a training program was required. The training curriculum for CAP cadets was intense. The nearly one-inch-thick training manual offered sections on enemy aircraft identification, physical fitness, communications, principles of flight, meteorology, ground work, and navigation. Cadets wore regulation army uniforms with special CAP insignia which included shoulder and cap emblems and an oblong pocket patch.⁷¹

Florida's CAP squadrons performed the mundane tasks along with the exciting and dangerous. While military and civilian personnel searched for scrap iron, the Pensacola squadron located a steel bridge on an abandoned logging road in Florida's panhandle. In the middle of a cold snap in northern Florida in February 1943, twelve CAP airplanes continually flew over eight thousand acres of cultivated farmland to keep the air circulating so that a frost would not form.⁷²

68. Peter J. Sones, personal flight log, in the possession of Peter J. Sones Jr., Atlanta, Georgia.

69. Peter J. Sones Jr. to author, August 1996.

70. Colonel Lester E. Hopper, *Civil Air Patrol Historical Monograph Number Two, A Study of Air Medals Awarded to Civil Air Patrol Members*, (Washington, D.C., 1984), 22.

71. *Civil Air Patrol Handbook* (Dallas, 1942).

72. Neprud, *Flying Minute Men*, 32.

The target-towing operation conducted by the CAP was one of the most dangerous duties performed in the war. Several Floridians including Captain Clifton K. Hyatt Jr. of North Miami lost their lives during target towing. An army air forces press release described the operations: "Special reels were installed by the Army in a number of the CAP planes for the unwinding of the cable on which the sleeve targets were towed."⁷³ The operations were conducted by two aircraft, one CAP, one army air forces. The intrepid CAP pilots towed targets while army pilots honed their gunnery skills by firing .50 calibre machine guns and 40 mm antiaircraft guns at the targets dragged behind the small one-engine CAP airplanes. The CAP ground crews enlivened the practices by painting caricatures of Hitler and Tojo on the targets.⁷⁴

In November 1945, five Floridians received the Exceptional Civilian Service Medal, the highest armed forces award given to civilians for wartime service, for their Civil Air Patrol duty. General Earle L. Johnson, national commander of the CAP, presented the award to Colonel Wright Vermilya, Lieutenant Colonel Lloyd J. Fales of Coconut Grove, Lieutenant Colonel Julius L. Gresham, Major Earnest Dwyer of Hialeah, and Major Peter J. Sones. All five had been commanders of the Civil Air Patrol's coastal patrol units. General Johnson commended each man "[f]or exceptionally meritorious achievement and for repeatedly exhibiting marked courage in the face of danger while performing regular wartime flying missions. By devoting his efforts loyally and patriotically under difficult conditions in time of national need to the leadership, training and supervision of civilian volunteers engaged in the performance of such wartime missions, he rendered a service to the United States deserving high recognition."⁷⁵

73. Civil Air Patrol, Headquarters 32d Army Air Forces Base Unit, Press Release, June 22, 1945, Civil Air Patrol folder 1.

74. *Ibid.*

75. *Palm Beach Post*, November 18, 1947. During the war, Vermilya was wing commander and had commanded Patrol Number 3 at Lantana, Florida; Fales was commander of Coastal Patrol Base Number 7 at Miami and later performed tow target duty at San Jose, California. Gresham had been commander of Coastal Patrol Base Number 5 at Flagler Beach, Florida, from May 1942 to December 1943, Tow Target Unit Number 5 at Falmouth, Mississippi, from December 1943 to May 1944, and Tow Target Unit Number 22 at Clinton, Maryland, from May 1944 to July 1945. Dwyer had been commander of Coastal Patrol Base Number 14 at Panama City, while Pete Sones served as commander of Coastal Patrol Base Number 13 at Sarasota from July 1942 to October 1943.

Official recognition of the contributions of those in CAP was long delayed. Executive Order Number 9158, dated May 11, 1942, established an Air Medal for use by all branches of the United States military. The Air Medal was awarded for actions in combat or non-combat to individuals "who have distinguished themselves by meritorious achievement while participating in aerial flight."⁷⁶ It was not until 1948, five years following their service, that members of the Civil Air Patrol received the Air Medal. Out of eight hundred and twenty-four air medals issued, Florida base members received more than their fair share with two hundred and five medals.⁷⁷

"The Civil Air Patrol was a crazy idea to begin with. It obviously couldn't work. You can't expect men to volunteer to go through fire and brimstone without pay or glory."⁷⁸ This opening paragraph in a story that appeared in *Colliers' Magazine* in April 1943 was obviously wrong. American men and women had volunteered in droves, lost their lives, and made little money as a result. The Civil Air Patrol made sense from a purely statistical standpoint. In 1941, the civil aviation force in the United States was "25,000 light aircraft, 128,000 certified pilots, and over 14,000 aircraft mechanics."⁷⁹

The Civil Air Patrol was made an auxiliary unit of the army air forces on April 29, 1943.⁸⁰ At the time of changeover of the CAP to the War Department, Robert A. Lovett, assistant secretary of war for air, told the press, "It is our intention to continue to make use of CAP in every field where the expense in men, money, and materials is justified as part of the over all war effort, including in that objective the importance of increasing the flying experience of a large number of civilians and stimulating and developing interest in aviation among all our citizens, particularly the younger men."⁸¹

In August 1943, the CAP coastal patrol mission was discontinued; there were now twenty-one coastal patrol bases. Henry "Hap" Arnold, general of the army air forces, said the CAP "[s]et up and went into operation almost overnight. It patrolled our shores—performed the anti-submarine work— at a time of almost desperate national crisis. If it had done nothing beyond that, the Civil Air Patrol

76. Hopper, *A Study of Air Medals Awarded to Civil Air Patrol Members*, 1-2.

77. *Ibid.*, 2.

78. *Colliers' Magazine*, April 24, 1943, 8.

79. Civil Air Patrol, pamphlet, "Introduction to Civil Air Patrol," 1976, p. 2, in author's possession.

80. Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II, Volume I*, 278.

81. *Aviation Magazine*, June 1943, 93.

would have earned an honorable place in the history of American Airpower.⁸² General Arnold had not overstated the meaningful contribution. During World War II, the Civil Air Patrol was credited with flying nearly twenty-four million air miles, sinking two German submarines, several probable sinkings in fifty-seven other attacks, and saving innumerable downed airmen.

82. Civil Air Patrol, Headquarters 32nd Army Air Forces Base Unit, "Civil Air Patrol History, Organization, and Purpose," January 21, 1948, 1, Civil Air Patrol folder 1.