

## Florida During World War II

Despite Florida's growing tourism, it was still the least-populated southern state in 1940, and ranked only 27th nationally. World War II changed this statistic. Florida played an important role in the events leading up to and during World War II.

The Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. On December 8th, America entered World War II. Many men and women came to Florida to help prepare soldiers for the war. Among the large number of soldiers from all over the U.S. who fought in this war were over 250,000 soldiers from Florida.

### Military Installations in Florida

Because Florida had a warm climate and a lot of vacant land available, it was ideal for the building of military bases and training soldiers. In the 1930s, there was a tremendous growth of military establishments throughout Florida. Florida soon had 172 military installations, ranging from both extremely large to relatively small camps. Two of the larger complexes were Camp Blanding, established near Starke, and the Jacksonville Naval Air Station.

Camp Blanding became Florida's fourth largest city during World War II. It grew to 180,000 acres and housed 55,000 soldiers at a time. Additional naval stations were reactivated at Key West, Drew and MacDill Air Fields in Tampa, Elgin Field at Valparaiso, and the Pensacola Naval Air Base. Two of the smaller camps were Sopchoppy Bombing Range and Immokalee Army Air Field. By the mid 1940s, there were forty airfields actively training military personnel throughout the state. Florida's weather conditions and flat land made it the perfect place for training, especially pilots.



By 1942, America's training facilities in Florida were heavily overcrowded. This led to the military taking over many hotel facilities. Among the hotels used were the Don Cesar in St. Petersburg, the Hollywood Beach Hotel, The Breakers in Fort Lauderdale, the Biltmore Hotel in Coral Gables, and several hundred other hotels and motels throughout Florida. Some of the places were used for barracks and others were taken over as makeshift hospitals for injured military personnel sent home from overseas.

**During World War II, many women served as WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service).**

## Events in Florida

World War II took place closer to the United States than many people ever realized. German U-Boats took advantage of mistakes made by the United States Intelligence Department. German U-Boats sank over twenty-four ships off of Florida's Atlantic and Gulf Coasts. Many ships could be seen burning from areas along the coast by Floridians and tourists. In late February 1942, German submarines attacked four merchant ships right off the east coast of Florida near Cape Canaveral. German spies were able to come on shore at Ponte Vedra (near Jacksonville). They were captured before they could blow up Florida's railroad lines and stop the shipment of war supplies.

The Civil Air Patrol was organized in March 1942, to protect the coasts of Florida. The "Mosquito Fleet" also helped to protect the coastlines of Florida. These convoys helped to eliminate the threat of submarines. Thousands of volunteers, called spotters, were trained to keep track of air activity up and down both shores.

## Economic Stimulus for Florida

World War II provided the greatest economic growth in American history. The war effort sent large amounts of money into Florida, leading to rebuilding and even growth after the Great Depression. War contracts helped to rebuild Florida's manufacturing, agricultural, and tourism businesses. Defense contracts revitalized Tampa after the city suffered severe economic cutbacks during the Great Depression. The local cigar industry had been wiped out by the depression and many workers were unemployed, but the construction of MacDill Air Field and two large shipbuilding companies employed those workers with premium wages. War contracts also help other cities recover, including Pensacola, Jacksonville, Miami, and Orlando. Florida's nickname almost changed from the Sunshine State to the Steel State.

With the rebuilding of industry, many jobs were available, but most men were off fighting in the war. Because of this, World War II provided an opportunity for American women. It helped show that women could handle a man's job. In Florida, women worked in shipyards, welding shops, and military bases. Women also helped run the agriculture industry, where one fourth of all farm workers were women. They were able to take over jobs left behind by the men and keep America stable. In addition to providing the necessary work force needed during the war, women bought war bonds and volunteered as nurses, fire fighters, and even police officers.

Florida's citrus industry thrived and Florida became the top state in the country for the first time in 1942-43, surpassing California. In 1942, Florida citrus growers patented a process to make frozen concentrated orange juice. The cotton industry also increased its profits. In 1945, researchers in Orlando discovered an insecticide, DDT, which became available for commercial use and changed Florida's agricultural industry. The drawback was that the chemical's long-term effects had not yet been tested, and it would later have a negative impact on Florida's wildlife and agricultural industries.

The war also changed the appearance of Florida cities. Key West and Miami populations surged during the war. In 1940, Key West was a small, quaint community of 13,000 but within five years 45,000 people lived in that small city. Miami's population of 173,000 increased to over 325,000 during the winter months of the war years. Between military personnel and winter tourists, the Miami area expanded tremendously. Many communities along the east coast, now nicknamed the Gold Coast, increased in population. Florida was no longer that small southern state. Thousands of people came to Florida because of the war and decided to live here. The state's population grew to about 2-3/4 million by 1950. The country's population grew 15% after the war, but Florida's rose a startling 46%!

### Service and Sacrifice

During the War, people had to cut back on food and all supplies that they bought. Everything was in short supply. Metal drives were held in cities all over the country. People brought anything metal they had at home, such as tin cans, pots, and car parts, to be melted down to make steel for the war machines. Florida cities also held money drives and collected money to build airplanes and ships. Another tactic that many families used to get through the war was growing their own food. People planted all kinds of gardens, which were called "victory gardens." Tampa officials estimated that there were over 10,000 victory gardens just in Tampa.

America and its allies eventually won the war in 1945, but at a tragic cost to the country. Over 400,000 Americans, (3000 of which were Floridians) were killed during the war. These men and women are remembered each year on Veteran's Day, November 11. Special ceremonies, including parades, are held around Florida and the United States honoring the veterans' service and sacrifice for our country.

### After World War II

After the war ended and the soldiers came home, America began to recover. It was a great time to celebrate; the economy was back on its feet, jobs were plentiful, and families were reunited. The 1940s ended with America, particularly Florida, moving into prosperous times.

