

Florida in World War II

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Castillo de San Marcos National
Monument, St. Augustine, Florida



Soldiers go through morning calisthenics while wearing gas masks; Miami Beach, 1943

The Coming of War With the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December of 1941 America entered into the conflict of World War II. As the massive effort of converting the country to a wartime footing began, Florida became a vital resource to the nation. The results of Florida's involvement would change the state forever. Over the course of four years Florida grew from a small, mostly rural and agricultural state into a massive industrial and training area preparing men and materiel for the war. Instead of tourists Florida was soon filled with recruits. Many of these servicemen and women would remember their time in the Sunshine State and would return after the war was over, contributing to the State's continuous growth.

Military Installations in Florida Florida's weather conditions, flat land and miles of accessible coastline made it ideal for the building of military training bases, especially for aviation and amphibious landing operations.. By 1942 Florida had over 172 military installations, ranging from relatively small specialty camps to extremely large bases. Camp Blanding near Starke became Florida's fourth largest city, growing to 180,000 acres and housing 55,000 soldiers at a time. There were forty airfields actively training military personnel throughout the state. Likewise Naval Stations and Airfields lined the coast from Pensacola in the panhandle to the newly built Mayport Naval Station near Jacksonville. Many of these sites are still active military installations today. Others have been transformed and now form the core of Florida's State Park system.

Economic Stimulus for Florida The war effort sent large amounts of money into Florida, which led to rebuilding and growth after the devastation of the Great Depression. War contracts helped to rebuild Florida's manufacturing, agricultural, and tourism businesses. Defense contracts boosted industry and revitalized Florida cities. Florida's nickname almost changed from the Sunshine State to the Steel State. With the rebuilding of industry, jobs were plentiful, 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 also thrived. In 1942 Florida became the top citrus producing state in the country surpassing California for the first time. Also Florida citrus growers patented a new process to create 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. 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 with a surge in urban population. The boom had begun.

The War Comes to St. Augustine Local youth were being shipped off to the dangerous corners of the world but until August of 1942 when The U. S. Coast Guard took over several local hotels, the direct impact of war on St. Augustine had been limited. The Ponce de Leon Hotel (now Flagler College) was converted into a Coast Guard boot camp, where young men learned the art of war. At any given time, as many 2,500 guardsmen were stationed in St. Augustine. Matanzas Bay was filled with zigzagging boats on maneuver. Even the famous protector of early St. Augustine, the Castillo de San Marcos, played an important part in the Coast Guard's war time role. "The vast grounds of the Fort area were in daily use by boot training companies and here thousands learned close order drill with as many as eight companies deployed there on most days," reported a local newspaperman. Few then realized just how close the war would come to home.

Submarines off the Florida Coast

The state's vulnerability became evident shortly after Pearl Harbor. In early 1942 German submarines opened an offensive, code named Operation Drumbeat, against the virtually undefended Allied shipping lanes along the east coast. Before the carnage was over, nearly 400 ships had been sunk, and thousands of lives lost. Dozens of ships were torpedoed just off Florida's Atlantic coast and others in the Gulf of Mexico. German submarine skippers used the light of coastal cities to silhouette their targets. Oil, debris, and dead bodies washed up on the beaches mixing with the driftwood and seashells along Florida's Atlantic Coast.

On the night of June 16, 1942, four saboteurs from a German submarine came ashore at Ponte Vedra Beach just a few miles north of St. Augustine carrying explosives and American money. Five days earlier, another submarine had put ashore four others on Long Island, NY. The German spies were captured before they can do any damage, but the entire Atlantic Seaboard was alarmed. Coast Guard units in St. Augustine patrolled the beaches on horseback, in jeeps, and even using specially trained patrol dogs.

Prisoners of War: the Enemy in Our Midst

Unknown to many residents of the state even at the time over ten thousand German and Italian prisoners of war were kept in Florida camps during the war. Housed in a system of camps throughout the state the POW's picked vegetables, harvested sugar cane, cut pulpwood, processed Florida's massive fruit crop and even worked as custodial workers at undermanned military installations and Miami resort hotels.

American military officials adhered to the provisions of the 1929 Geneva Convention, which stipulated that captives must receive the same food, clothing, and housing as the troops of the home nation. One of the reasons why the POW's were kept secret is the fear that Americans might think they were being "coddled." Especially when compared to allied prisoners held in Germany.

Service and Sacrifice

Because of the need to supply millions of men in the service, almost everything was in short supply in the civilian sector, strict rationing was put in place. Ration books were required to purchase basic necessities such as milk, eggs, gasoline and clothing. Scrap drives were held in cities all over the state in an attempt to increase supply through recycling and build civilian morale. Rubber drives inundated collection points under tons of old tires. Metal drives brought tin cans, pots, car parts, and even some of St. Augustine's old iron cannons to be melted down supposedly to make steel for the war machines. Housewives were encouraged to save their used lard to be made into explosives. Florida cities also held money drives to build airplanes and ships. Families were encouraged to grow and process their own vegetables and meats. "Victory Gardens" sprouted everywhere. Officials estimated that there were over 10,000 victory gardens in Tampa alone.

After the War

On May 5, 1945 fighting ended in Europe, VE (Victory in Europe) Day was celebrated throughout the nation and around the world. On August 15, 1945 Japan surrendered and hostilities ceased in the Pacific.

America and its allies had been victorious, but at a tragic cost to the country. Over 400,000 Americans, (3,000 of which were Floridians) were killed during the war. After the war ended and the soldiers came home, America began to recover and reconvert to a peacetime economy. It was a great time to celebrate; the economy was booming, jobs were plentiful, and families were reunited. The 1940s ended with America, particularly Florida, moving into prosperous times. Thousands of people came to Florida because of the war and decided to live here afterwards. While the nation's overall population grew 15% after the war, Florida's population rose a startling 46%. By 1950 the state's population was almost 2.75 million. Florida is still growing today; St. Augustine, Florida's first community, is one of the most rapidly growing areas in the entire county



England rejoices at the good news;
London Daily Mirror, May 8, 1945