Wartime Wilmington: An Overview
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Editor's Note: The Lower Cape Fear Historical Society is one of many agencies in the area taking part in the year-long Wartime Wilmington Commemoration activities. This edition of the Bulletin is the first in a three-issue series dealing with World War II related topics. We hope that everyone will enjoy these three issues and would like to encourage everyone to take part in the various commemoration activities taking place throughout the year. If you would like more information regarding these activities, please contact the staff at the Latimer House.

Andrew Duppsadt

As our region begins a year of celebration dedicated to the accomplishments of the World War II generation, it is helpful to review both the extent of the military presence in this area and its impact on the community between 1941 and 1945. World War II created the greatest challenge for Southeastern North Carolina since the Civil War, a challenge that was met successfully. In recent years, the men and women responsible for this victory on the home front have retired and public awareness of their achievements has declined. The Wartime Wilmington Commemoration, a series of events that will run through 1999, is dedicated to perpetuating their legacy.1

Even before the conflict began, southeastern North Carolina enjoyed a strong military and industrial presence. This influence was destined to expand enormously during the wartime years. Of the 15,000,000 Americans who served in the armed forces, more than 2,000,000 were trained in the Tar Heel State. North Carolina also became a major combat zone, with more Allied ships and German submarines sunk off its coast than anywhere else in the Western Hemisphere. This portion of the Battle of the Atlantic reached its height during the first six months of 1942 and continued intermittently until V-E Day. Hundreds of lives were lost and substantial damage was inflicted on the merchant fleets of America and her partners.2 In helping to combat this menace, the region made a dramatic contribution to national defense.

In the winter of 1940, the Army unveiled plans for a new $13,000,000 Coast Artillery base in the small town of Holly Ridge, midway between Wilmington and Jacksonville, on the border between Pender and Onslow Counties. The sprawling facility, named Camp Davis, embraced 35,000 acres of uninhabited swamp and timberland. More than 900 cantonments were constructed in four months as training facilities for 20,000 veterans and young men drafted by Selective Service.

Aerial view of Camp Davis, near Holly Ridge. Barrage balloons can be seen in the foreground. Courtesy of Fort Fisher State Historic Site.

The Coast Artillery had deep roots in the coastal defense tradition that had been central to the mission of the Army in the 18th and 19th centuries. By 1940, however, the army was in the midst of a transformation to antiaircraft defense, a role it had first undertaken during World War I. An important factor in the selection of the Holly Ridge site was its isolated location near the ocean, where target ranges or "firing positions" could be maintained more easily. At Fort Fisher, the old Confederate stronghold at the mouth of the Cape Fear River, the firing position included facilities for a full regiment of men in training. Following the war, the Navy used the firing position on Topsail Island for experiments involving the ramjet missile, precursor of the cruise missile.3

The first troop cadres arrived at Camp Davis in April 1941. In keeping with the Army's pre-war tables of organization, the initial units activated there were Coast Arti-
lery regiments. During the war, a more flexible system of brigades, groups, and battalions superseded these formations. Among the units trained at the base were the 41st, 43rd, 47th, 49th, and 50th Antiaircraft Artillery Brigades. Soldiers from Camp Davis fought in every theatre of the war. To cite only one example of their distinguished combat record, elements of the 49th AAA Brigade assaulted Omaha and Utah Beaches in Normandy in the first wave of Allied troops on D-Day, June 6, 1944. This brigade was effectively a division in strength during the campaign for Western Europe. It numbered 52,000 men and exercised tactical control over 12 groups and 55 specialized Mobile or Semi-Mobile Gun, Automatic Weapons, Machine Gun, Barrage Balloon, and Searchlight Battalions.

Many of the troops assigned to Camp Davis were African-American. Predominantly black units stationed at a segregated portion of the base known as Camp Gibbins included the 54th Coast Artillery Regiment, which was reassigned from Texas in 1941 as a training cadre. The 99th and 100th Coast Artillery Regiments, both activated before Pearl Harbor, were later converted to AAA battalions. Their personnel saw service on New Guinea during the Pacific campaign.4

In March 1942, the Antiaircraft Artillery Board and Antiaircraft Artillery School were transferred from Fort Monroe, Virginia, to Camp Davis. Wartime additions enlarged the base to 46,000 acres and added hundreds of new buildings, increasing the military investment to $42,000,000. As of June 1944, more than 37,000 troops were stationed there. Ironically, the need for antiaircraft defense declined during the second half of the war because of the air superiority achieved by the Allies over the Germans and Japanese. Many AAA battalions were eventually redesignated as Field Artillery units or used as infantry replacements. The AAA School trained a total of 57,000 officers, enlisted men, and officer candidates prior to its relocation to Fort Bliss, Texas, in October 1944. After the close of antiaircraft operations, the Air Force and Marines utilized the base as a hospital, redistribution center, and Allied forces training center.5

Camp Davis was only the first of a bewildering array of regional installations. In April 1941, ground was broken in Onslow County, outside Jacksonville, for the Marine Corps Barracks and Fleet Marine Forces Training Center, New River. Later renamed Camp Lejeune, the vast new complex covered more than 200 square miles, including 11 miles of coastline and river front ideally suited for amphibious training. The 1st Marine Division conducted maneuvers there prior to its departure overseas in 1942 for service on Guadalcanal.

The operations at Camp Lejeune reflected the enormous scope of Marine Corps responsibilities. African-American personnel were trained at a segregated area called Montford Point. Among the forces activated there were the first two predominantly black units in the Marine Corps, the 51st and 52nd Defense Battalions. The base housed schools for combat units, para troopers, artillerymen, amphibious units, engineers, scouts, snipers, medics, radar operators, barrage balloon units, communications specialists, weapons and munitions experts, motor transport personnel, Women Marines, quartermasters, clerks, cooks, bakers, and even war dogs. In the summer of 1946, Camp Lejeune became headquarters of the 2nd Marine Division upon its return from the Pacific. This affiliation has lasted to the present.6

Located in Craven County, midway between Jackson ville and New Bern, Marine Corps Air Station, Cherry Point, was commissioned in June 1942 at the height of the coastal conflict. Its naval and Marine squadrons carried out antisubmarine patrols along the shoreline and sank two German U-boats. The station served as headquarters for the 3rd and 9th Marine Air Wings, which trained Marine Air Corps units at this location and six auxiliary fields, including Kinston Air Base in Lenoir County. In March 1944, 3rd MAW numbered 15,470 personnel with 465 aircraft. Prior to its transfer overseas, it activated 10 groups, 37 tactical squadrons, and one air-warning squadron. Among them was the first Marine night fighter squadron, VMF(N)-311. Other base activities were paratrooper training, an aviation ground school, and an aerial photography school. MCAS Cherry Point became the home of women reservists assigned to Marine Corps aviation. In addition, it acquired an engine overhaul operation that serviced aircraft from around the nation.7

Fort Bragg, ten miles northwest of Fayetteville in Cumberland County, was pre-war headquarters of the 9th Infantry Division and had long been known as a Field Artillery center. In the summer of 1942, a new convention of warfare was born there when the 82nd Infantry Division became the first American troop unit to convert to airborne status. The airborne concept revolutionized Allied military strategy, especially in Normandy, where it was critical to the success of the D-Day invasion. The 101st Airborne Division joined the 82nd at Fort Bragg in the autumn of 1942. After both formations deployed overseas in 1943, the fort served as staging ground for the 17th Airborne Division. The 11th and 13th Airborne Divisions were activated at Camp Mackall, 40 miles west of Fayetteville. Supporting aircraft of the Air Force Air Transport Command were based at Pope Field. The 1 Troop Carrier Command conducted glider training at Laurinburg-Maxton Air

![Anti-aircraft artillery training at Fort Fisher. Courtesy of Fort Fisher State Historic Site.](image-url)
in Wilmington. Opened in February 1944, the main Wilmington camp was located on the southeast corner of Carolina Beach Road and Shipyard Boulevard, and housed 500 former German soldiers. Small boys considered it daring to taunt the inmates from just outside the barbed-wire fence that enclosed the compound, but the prisoners were not a security threat. Under military supervision, they worked on local farms and in the fertilizer and pulpwood industries to help relieve a severe shortage of agricultural labor.

The largest defense industry in Wilmington was the North Carolina Shipbuilding Company. Established in February 1941, the plant was a subsidiary of the Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company, which had contracted with the U.S. Maritime Commission to build a new prefabricated hull design, the famous C-1 or “Liberty” ship, to replace shipping losses suffered by the Allies. Valued at $20,393,358, the modern facility grew to 160 acres and embraced nine shipways, three piers, 67 cranes, and 19 miles of railroad track. Although it never achieved the production miracles of the West Coast yards run by shipping magnate Henry J. Kaiser, its low manufacturing costs and average of 11 launchings per month earned it an accolade from the Truman Commission, a congressional committee that was generally critical of wartime industrial efforts. According to Senator Truman's report, the plant possessed an “excellent record” and had “the lowest average cost per ship... of any of the 16 yards building Liberty ships in 1943.”

In August 1943, construction shifted to a second vessel intended for mass production, the C-2, a predecessor of the “Victory” ship. A larger, improved design, intended to compete in world trade and follow the war, the C-2 hull was capable of conversion to a cargo ship, refrigerator ship, auxiliary transport, attack transport, ammunition carrier, or headquarters ship. After military orders had ceased, several were modified as passenger vessels for the American Line and Grace Line, complete with air-conditioned state-rooms and swimming pools. The company built 126 C-1s and 117 C-2s, a total of 243, before operations finally terminated in the autumn of 1946.

Kure Beach, the coastal resort community in southern New Hanover County near the tip of the peninsula formed by the Atlantic Ocean and the Cape Fear River, was the site of one of the most revolutionary industrial plants in the United States. From 1934 to 1945, the Ethyl Corporation-Dow Chemical bromine extraction plant, the only facility of its kind in the nation, supplied a critical component in the manufacture of tetraethyl lead, an additive that reduced engine knocking in the high-test gasoline of the era. In addition to bromine, the seawater extraction process yielded a cornucopia of valuable industrial byproducts, including gold, silver, potassium, copper, aluminum, and common table salt. Its military significance was fully recognized by America’s enemies. In July 1943, a German U-boat surfaced briefly in the waters off the beach and fired five shells at the plant from its deck gun, all of them fortunately errant.

On December 7, 1941, Americans were shocked and enraged by the news that the Japanese had attacked Pearl
Harbor. The change from peacetime to wartime footing was as abrupt in New Hanover County as it was in the rest of the nation. A veil of secrecy suddenly descended over military operations. The escalating toll from enemy submarines, operating openly just off the coast, added urgency to the mobilization. The populace wrestled with its first blackouts, with shortages in dozens of consumer products previously taken for granted, and with a dawning awareness of the grim reality of the struggle.

When the war began, Wilmington was already a boom town, a state of affairs that it shared with defense communities around the nation. The conflict brought economic prosperity as well as housing shortages, overcrowded schools, congested traffic, and rising crime rates. Efforts to define even the dimensions of the problem produced contradictory figures. In February 1943, the Chamber of Commerce claimed that the combined population of the city and county had “tripled” in three years, from 48,000 to 120,000. If true, the actual growth rate would have been 250%. But the national statistics compiled by the Bureau of the Census do not support either estimate. The Census identified Mobile County, Alabama, with a 64.7% increase in population between 1940 and 1944, as the urban area most heavily impacted by wartime growth. Hampton Roads, Virginia (44.7%), San Diego, California (43.7%), Charleston, South Carolina (38.1%), and Portland, Oregon (31.8%) followed Mobile.14

In December 1943, county officials asserted that 115,000 registrants had applied for War Ration Book No. 4, which supplied coupons for commodities such as sugar and meat. Two months later, a second estimate reduced the total to 81,285. The state lowered it again in July 1944, announcing a tally of 79,535 in a survey of population trends supposedly based on registrations for the same ration book.15 In all likelihood, nobody really knew how many people there were. Inadequate sampling techniques, a lack of trained canvassers, and the difficulty of identifying different kinds of military, civilian, permanent, and transient residents compounded the confusion.

The sources and effects of the population explosion were easier to describe. As the armed forces expanded dramatically, tens of thousands of military personnel poured into the region. In their wake trailed an army of dependents, the majority of whom were wives or sweethearts following their menfolk. Many families brought their children with them. The Shipbuilding Company, whose employment peaked at 21,000 in March 1943, was the largest non-military source of the increase. Turnover was heavy because many experienced male workers were siphoned off into uniform. The plant hired 1,200 women in non-traditional production jobs.16

Civilian transients included parents visiting their children in service and relatives of troops returning to the United States. In April 1944, the Morning Star noted that the flow of visitors to the area intensified just before foreign operations began, as relatives rushed to spend a final few moments with their loved ones before units in training redeployed overseas. This unusual phenomenon had manifested itself prior to the landings in both Africa and Italy. The newspaper accurately predicted that the latest surge signaled the imminent invasion of Europe, which started a month and a half later when Allied troops stormed ashore on the beaches of Normandy.17

Swellings the ranks of the temporary visitors further were the trainees at local bases, chiefly unmarried enlisted men, who descended in hordes on Wilmington whenever they obtained leave, especially on Saturday nights. At the height of the war, the United Service Organizations (USO) estimated the size of this weekly human tide at 35,000—nearly 2,000,000 each year.

To help local citizens handle this enormous challenge, the USO established 14 facilities in New Hanover County, including 12 in Wilmington, one in Wrightsville Beach, and one in Carolina Beach. The federal government constructed large centers on Nixon Street and Second Street for African-American and white service personnel. Social programs and entertainment were provided to members of the armed forces, industrial workers, their relatives and children, and civilian transients. At the height of the war, attendance at the flagship Second Street club reached 63,000 per month. Hundreds of volunteers kept the building open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Typical events included “big band” dances, plays, music recitals, art exhibits, hobby shows, guest lectures, wedding receptions, and weekly radio broadcasts. On weekend nights, 600 men crowded into the basement dormitory. By 1946, the USO had ministered to an audience ten times the size of the city and county combined, an extraordinary marshaling of civic resources.18

The Chamber of Commerce calculated that the typical service member on leave spent $15 per visit. Business owners eagerly competed for their share of the military entertainment dollar. In downtown Wilmington, professional wrestlers named Chief Little Beaver, “Blimp” Levy (who claimed to weigh 640 pounds), and Mae Young (“the curvaceous blonde with the agility and beauty of a chorus girl and the power of an Army tank”) cavorted on the stage of proud old Thalian Hall. At Carolina Beach, where the boardwalk was jammed with crowds looking for a good time, concerns such as the Tropical Arcade catered to the military trade. Fort Fisher soldiers happily paid a quarter apiece to play simple games that included throwing baseballs at hinged boards painted with the heads of Hitler and Hirohito. Carl Winner, the owner of the Arcade, sometimes grossed $1,000 per day.

A good meal and cold drink topped the list of many soldiers’ priorities. “You couldn’t get in a restaurant downtown,” Claude Howell, a prominent artist and Atlantic Coast Line Railroad employee, recalled for a Morning Star retrospective in December 1991. “You just didn’t even try.” St. John’s Tavern, a favorite watering hole, opened in May 1943 in the 19th-century Masonic building on Orange Street. African-American soldiers and Marines frequented The Green Lantern on Campbell Street, where beer was available for 35 cents a bottle. Robert Pierce, who worked for the government providing refrigerated food to military bases, recalled conditions there for the Star. “It was a rough place. There was no telling what would happen to you if you went in there.... We handed out a lot of beer, but it was a weaker alcohol than what they have today. It had to be
weaker, the guys drank so much. They drank that stuff by the pitcher.  

Nightclubs were popular with service members of both races. At The Barn, a black-owned business at Eleventh and Meares Streets, the cover charge was $2 and a shot of bourbon cost 50 cents. Del Morocco, on Dawson Street, also catered to an African-American clientele. The Plantation Club, midway between the city and beach, was packed every evening. Hannah Block, a USO stalwart, Red Cross volunteer, and the only female lifeguard in New Hanover County, discovered a suspicious character lurking in its recesses. “One week he would come in dressed as an Army officer. The next week he would be wearing a Navy uniform.” When he showed up in the regalia of a third service branch, Mrs. Block informed Major Leo F. Jobe of the Carolina Beach Army Recreation Area and the impersonator was taken into custody.

War boosted the local economy but badly strained every kind of public service. Transportation was an early victim of excessive numbers. Soldiers trying to use the antiquated bus system were sometimes forced to repair broken-down vehicles themselves. Military transport took up some of the slack. “[T]he big GI bus was an important part of the home-front scene,” wrote Martha E. Vann for The State in 1970. “Each of the olive-drab, cumbersome vehicles seemed to have a personality of its own, and its moods no doubt were influenced by the type of transportation it provided.” To assist shipyard commuters, the Maritime Commission contributed a dozen tractor-trailers capable of carrying 100 riders apiece. The ACL put passenger cars on the Wilmington-to-Jacksonville run, enabling service personnel to hop a train to the big city for just ten cents.

Prosperity also brought a surge in crime and related social problems. As early as November 1941, the New Hanover Defense Council expressed concern over a 124% increase in arrests during the previous year, mostly for traffic violations, public intoxication, and disorderly conduct. These figures did not include military personnel. The FBI conducted periodic meetings for regional officials at which such topics were explored in greater depth. At one conference, held in the Second Street USO in July 1942, “prostitution and its inevitable scourge of social diseases were called to the attention of Eastern North Carolina law enforcement officers.” Despite the Morning Star’s careful phrasing, there is little reason to suppose that the news came as a surprise to the policemen who attended Special Agent Edward Scheidt’s presentation. Indeed, the problem extended to the doorstep of the very building in which they sat. A veteran from Florida, revisiting the center in 1997, recalled seeing at least a dozen women, accompanied by willing soldiers, working the adjacent alley on weekend evenings, “and they weren’t Junior Hostesses, either.”

Housing remained the worst crisis. More than 1,400 new homes were built in Wilmington between 1940 and 1942, when restrictions on materials ended non-priority construction. Anyone with apartments or spare rooms to rent made them available. But these expedients did not begin to address the magnitude of the shortage. The trailer park, ubiquitous symbol of wartime expansion, made its appearance near the shipyard. A total of 530 of the small aluminum vehicles, into which a half-dozen family members might be crowded, were put in place. As employment at the company grew, the government subsidized the construction of modest wooden residences for employees at Lake Forest and Hillcrest. By 1943, with the addition of 3,762 units in Maffitt Village, the worst of the problems at the plant had been alleviated. A school at Lake Forest and commercial buildings near Maffitt Village provided some of the amenities of an ordinary suburb.

Officers’ wives traditionally boarded in the nearest urban center rather than in the limited facilities available at military camps. They were joined by the spouses of enlisted men, who lent support to their loved ones through boot camp, specialized training, or the three-month AAA Officer Candidate School. All were at the mercy of unscrupulous property owners. In April 1943, a scandal erupted when it was revealed that some of the most prominent citizens of Wilmington were renting their beach cottages to Army wives for the fall and winter months, then evicting them for personal occupancy during the summer. More than 200 wives, many of them pregnant, planned a sit-down strike in protest. “The war worker’s wife gets a house and a big salary,” they fumed. “What do we get?” The controversy attracted the attention of a national watchdog, the Office of Price Administration (OPA). The women were allowed to keep their temporary homes.

Case workers for Travelers Aid, an affiliate of the USO, assumed the burden of helping short-term arrivals who could not make advance arrangements for housing because

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