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James Anthony Schnur

Ellen Babb

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St. Petersburg Museum of History

Presents

St. Petersburg goes to WAR

Curators
Ellen J. Babb, Curator of Education
Heritage Park

James A. Schnur, Archivist
University of South Florida

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St. Petersburg Goes to War, 1941-1945

World War II forever changed St. Petersburg. Thundering war clouds storming across the globe brought profound changes throughout the “Sunshine City.” After the United States entered the Second World War, civic leaders and residents sought to bolster the city’s languishing economy by touting the area’s climate to military officials. More than 120,000 recruits and instructors - some accompanied by their families - visited St. Petersburg during the war, and many returned after hostilities had ended. As the world celebrates the fiftieth anniversary of the war’s end, join the St. Petersburg Museum of History as it revisits the experiences and legacies of World War II.
The Prelude To War

As the war began in Europe in 1939, St. Petersburg (Florida's fourth largest city) was described by the Federal Writer's Project as a winter resort occupying "a semi-isolated area of 58 square miles on the southern tip of the Pinellas peninsula."

For more than a decade, the Great Depression had wreaked havoc on the city's tourist-based economy. Despite this, St. Petersburg's population increased by 50 percent between 1930 and 1940. Vast stretches of undeveloped land provided an important inducement for new construction. More than $10 million in federal funds for New Deal work projects, military expenditures, and relief payments helped St. Petersburg weather the economic storm.

With war clouds gathering in Europe and Asia, St. Petersburg citizens were increasingly touched by events in far-away places. However, economic concerns remained paramount as people struggled to return to "business as usual."
Long before the first American lives were lost in the Pacific, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt committed America to the war effort by authorizing U.S. convoys to protect military and economic aid to beleaguered Allied Nations. Congress provided the money to turn American factories into producers of planes, ships, and other war weapons.

For their part, concerned citizens aided Allied troops through volunteer work here in America. By December 1941, more than 1,100 branches of "Bundles for Britain" existed throughout the country. More than one million volunteers, including many St. Petersburg residents, produced "care" packages to be delivered or air-dropped to British troops. Packages could include sweaters, cigarettes, gum, playing cards, soap, and ace bandages. Eight months before the bombing of Pearl Harbor, a "Bundles for Britain" sewing group at the St. Petersburg Woman's Club reported that it had donated over 250 garments and had raised over $100 in its two months of existence. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the group reorganized as "Bundles for Bluejackets" and enlarged its mission to include aid for both British and American troops.
Yesterday, December 7, 1941 - a date which will live in infamy - the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan. The facts of yesterday speak for themselves. The people of the United States have already formed their opinions and well understand the implications to the very life and safety of our nation.

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt

Photograph on next page:

After the United States declared war, recruitment stations appeared in storefronts and on street corners throughout the country. This "open air" booth on Central Avenue enticed residents to enlist in the United States Coast Guard.
Joining the World at War

After Hitler's invasion of Poland in September 1939, American involvement in the war steadily increased. In 1940, Congress approved the Selective Training and Service Act. This first peace-time civilian draft registered 9,815 men in Pinellas County in one day (7,144 of them enrolled in the St. Petersburg district, which also included neighboring communities such as Gulfport and Pinellas Park).

Registrants represented the entire community. African Americans comprised well over one-quarter of those who signed registration cards. Even prisoners between the ages of 21 and 36 in the St. Petersburg city jail received furloughs to register, as long as they promised to return to their cells by nightfall.

While eligible men signed up for the draft, the lives of many women were also touched by the war abroad. Men and women from all segments of society gave their assistance to the Red Cross and other service organizations. This level of involvement increased dramatically after the bombing of Pearl Harbor.
"We Have the Plants,  
U. S. Needs Them and  
We Need Defense Jobs --  
So Why Let Red Tape Interfere?"

On December 7, 1941, the *St. Petersburg Times* printed an editorial with this telling headline. While similar to earlier calls for federal officials to remember the commercial and industrial potential of central Florida, this piece - written just hours before Japanese plans departed for their mission at Pearl Harbor - sent another important message: Let St. Petersburg citizens and businesses do their part to bolster America's defense.

"We know St. Petersburg has facilities that could be used with profit by the government in defense work . . . And we know these communities, particularly those like St. Petersburg, which have been losing skilled workers to outside defense jobs because such employment does not exist here at home for them, would find these contracts tremendously helpful in maintaining economic stability and balance."

While St. Petersburg lacked the firm industrial base found in many cities, it had no shortage of vacant hotel rooms. These lodgings would soon play an important part in the war effort and in the transformation of St. Petersburg.
The Mobilization and Globalization of St. Petersburg

Although geographically "southern", St. Petersburg retained a different character than that found in other cities in the region. The large seasonal influx of tourists over the years had given the community a more cosmopolitan flavor. Nevertheless, many locals had rarely traveled beyond the state line, and even fewer had ventured outside of the South.

Wartime opportunities and obligations propelled a great migration. Some St. Petersburg residents departed for distant defense plants, training centers, and battlefields. Meanwhile, the growing military infrastructure brought thousands of recruits and their families to the area, even if only for a brief visit. A large number of available hotel rooms and a successful, expanding U.S. Coast Guard Maritime Service Base on Bayboro Harbor helped city leaders to persuade War Department officials to choose St. Petersburg as a major training center in 1942. The invasion of young recruits reinvigorated the city, giving it a level of energy not witnessed since the boom years of the mid-1920s.
The Military Presence in St. Petersburg

Plenty of Room at the Inn

As a resort community dependent on tourism, St. Petersburg faced a dilemma: How could the city sustain its economy when rationing and traveling restrictions prevented many seasonal visitors from returning? Aware of the military mobilization occurring throughout the country, city authorities saw a probable solution: the War Department.

Wartime shortages, both actual and predicted, made St. Petersburg and other Florida communities prime locations for military installations. The armed forces required immediate training facilities in areas with pre-existing infrastructures. Pressed by the urgency of the global crisis, military leaders sought hotels and other structures that could serve as barracks, cafeterias, and classrooms on a very short notice.

Photograph on next page:

Marches along streets, such as this parade along Central Avenue, attracted large, enthusiastic audiences.
Seizing an opportunity during the stagnant tourist season in the spring of 1942, the Florida Hotel Commission and local civic leaders negotiated with War Department officials to select St. Petersburg as a major center for training Army Air Corps recruits. The federal government secured leases for every major St. Petersburg hotel (with the exception of the Suwanee), as well as many smaller establishments.

The city’s experience was repeated across the Sunshine State, as recruits trained at more than 170 military facilities.

Photograph on next page:
These U. S. Maritime Service trainees stayed at the Soreno Hotel in downtown St. Petersburg in 1943. The Soreno joined over 60 other establishments and numerous encampments that served as way stations for visiting soldiers.
The Army Air Corps and the Khaki Invasion

The first stream of Army Air Corps trainees arrived in June 1942. Within a few months, a flood of over 10,000 soldiers wearing khaki and olive drab uniforms marched in city streets and occupied hotel rooms. Shortly after arriving, commanders moved their headquarters from the Vinoy Park Hotel to the Empire office building on Central Avenue. Expansion continued as soldiers moved into the Pennsylvania Hotel and the Palais Royale building. By February 1943, Army officers had taken over nearly 70 facilities to quarter the swelling number of troops.

Military drills, convoys, and exercises covered the Pinellas peninsula. Soldiers spread throughout the city, filling restaurants, stores, trolleys, and nearly everything else. A local street car company employed as many as 110 conductors to meet the growing demand caused by the influx of Army Air Corps personnel.

During peak periods, massive tent cities covered parks and hotel grounds. The largest “tent city” spread across the Jungle Club golf course on the western end of town. At one point, almost 10,000 soldiers occupied this encampment. It was disbanded in the spring of 1943 after only a few months of service.

Photograph on next page:
Training exercises along the coast reassured local residents who feared enemy submarines lurking in the Gulf of Mexico.
The Maritime Base at Bayboro Harbor

The winds of war brought a high tide of activity to Bayboro Harbor. By late 1939, planes based at the United States Coast Guard Air Station began flying over the Gulf of Mexico in search of submarines. The Coast Guard also reactivated its small naval base, converting a facility that had sat dormant since 1933 into a training center for merchant marines.

In 1942, federal administrators transferred oversight authority for the Coast Guard from the Commerce Department to the Navy. Soon after, the United States Maritime Service assumed the duty of training merchant sailors, allowing Coast Guard authorities to concentrate on defense and anti-submarine activities. As new waves of recruits arrived, the Maritime Service expanded a long a dredged peninsula that jutted into Bayboro Harbor.
Bringing the War Home  
Sacrifices of the Heart  
Transforming the Social Landscape

St. Petersburg's beaches, numerous taverns, restaurants, and recreational amenities attracted soldiers from MacDill Field in Tampa, as well as trainees from St. Petersburg and its environs for weekend and evenings forays. The city's social scene was revitalized by young soldiers who changed St. Petersburg's cultural landscape.

On any given Friday or Saturday night, men in uniform literally invaded St. Petersburg, often escorted by young women who obviously enjoyed the temporary shakeup in local demography. Many wartime romances blossomed during dances at such popular places as The Pier, the Coliseum, and the Manhattan Casino. On a less glamorous scale, even ping-pong games and luncheons at the men's club on The Pier provided the foundation for many relationships.

Photograph on the next page:

Military convoys transported young local women and soldiers to the dance areas.
The War Comes Home

Throughout the early 1940s, citizens on the home front struggled for a sense of normalcy. The realities of World War II shaped and reshaped daily life.

In St. Petersburg, many middle-class women went to work for the first time, completing a circle of family involvement in the war effort. Daily features in the *St. Petersburg Times* detailed the activities of city residents in military service and in home front volunteer work.

There were other reminders of the sacrifices of war. Some arrived in the form of "V-mail" (victory mail). These personal messages were sent from and to loved ones serving in the armed forces often describing wartime experiences. Other communications were even more somber, such as the telegrams received by parents and wives of young men wounded or killed in battle. Yet through it all, students graduated, couples married, and babies were born - a reflection of the undaunted optimism of the American people.

*Photograph on the next page:*

Plays, water sports, and other forms of light entertainment provided a boost to the morale of battle-weary veterans recuperating at the Don CeSar.
Cultivating Victory

Despite the urban character of St. Petersburg, much of Pinellas County remained rural. Food rationing and commodity shortages encouraged many residents to plant victory gardens. Crops included tomatoes, green peas, yellow squash, spinach, and watermelons. Others took advantage of the bountiful fishing in pristine waters, as well as the nearly 16,000 acres of citrus groves located in the county. Teachers and school children enthusiastically planted crops on school grounds throughout the county.

Scrap Drives

The Second World War disrupted the distribution of resources. Many scarce commodities were required in great quantities for wartime industries. Drives to collect aluminum and other scrap metals began prior to Pearl Harbor and expanded rapidly during the following years.

St. Petersburg's citizens collected an impressive amount of scrap items. By June 1942, local Boy Scouts had amassed 500,000 pounds of newspapers and magazines in a door-to-door paper recycling campaign. These children joined other boys and girls in a Junior Defense Corps, a cadre of youth who scoured the city for paper to be sorted and bundled. A newspaper article notes that residents had salvaged 9,836,679 pounds of paper, rags, metals, and rubber - the equivalent of 164 pounds per person - during a campaign that lasted through November 1942. The
St. Petersburg salvage division, with its staff of 20 men and 5 women, built upon this successful endeavor with a new drive in 1943 to acquire old typewriters, nylons, tin cans, and other items.

Not only did scrap drives provide a steady stream of raw materials for industry, but they also provided tangible benefits for the local community. Some metal collected in St. Petersburg went to the Tomlinson Vocational School for use in welding classes, while books and magazines discarded by residents often found new admirers at local military installations.

Photograph on the next page:
Children eagerly participated in scrap drives.
Hoping that Austerity Might Turn into Prosperity

A January 1, 1943, St. Petersburg Times editorial enumerated the goals shared by residents of the city and Pinellas County. Major goals for the new year included:

1. Victory in the war and the peace.
2. An opportunity to further serve Uncle Sam in training his armed forces and his merchant seamen.
3. Progress. We want to prepare for an increased tourist trade after the war; we want to attract more permanent residents during the war; we want to house families of war workers and families not essential to the war centers where they now live; we want industries; we want to lay the groundwork for a sea and airport so that we may take our rightful place in world trade that is to follow the war.
4. A simple voters' registration system. We want to help democracy work better by making it possible for a citizen to register once and be qualified for all elections, city, primary, freeholder, and general.
5. Free bridges so that traffic may freely come and go on all routes in and out of the city and county. (The Gandy Bridge and Davis Causeway remained toll roads until 1944, limiting traffic between Tampa and the Pinellas Peninsula).
6. City beautification.
7. A new stockade or prison farm for the city.
8. A real school survey so that we may determine the cost of putting all of schools in good repair.
9. A continued effort to have our county master airport (St. Petersburg International airport) declared a port of entry so that we may do business with our southern neighbors after the war.

10. A hard-hitting Chamber of Commerce which will keep St. Petersburg humming with activity.

11. More victory gardens.

12. A better development of our agricultural resources.

13. A sane session of the legislature; 30 days if possible. This is one year that expenses should be held to the rock-bottom, all horseplay eliminated and the necessary work tackled in the best business manner.

14. An efficient administration of business in all municipal and county government so that the burden to the taxpayers will be as light as possible.

15. A record purchase of war stamps and bonds.

16. Full cooperation with the government in its war programs and its rationing programs.

While many of these wishes specifically dealt with the war effort, some of the same issues remain concerns of St. Petersburg residents to this day.
Rosie got a boyfriend Charlie:  
He’s a Marine.  
Rosie is protecting Charlie,  
Working overtime on the riveting machine.

During World War II, government agencies and private businesses recruited millions of American women for employment in wartime industries and in other non-traditional fields when the nation’s young men left for war. More than at any other time in American history, older and married women, many with children, entered the country’s labor force in large numbers.

Even though St. Petersburg was without large war contacts or the types of industry that “Rosie the Riveter” found in large urban settings, local women were able to take advantage of other new employment opportunities - at least “for the duration.”
St. Petersburg women worked in neighborhood gas stations as auto mechanics, commuted to Tampa to work in the shipyards, rented out rooms, managed family businesses, operated buses and trolleys, and did whatever else was necessary to keep the home front secure for their families and community.

Predictably, once the crisis had abated and their services were no longer needed, women returned home, some assuming traditional domestic roles.

Photograph on the next page:

St. Petersburg women shared a strong tradition of service in volunteer associations dating back to the early 1900s. During the war, traditional church and civic organizations and women's clubs continued to flourish. Associations like the Red Cross, the Civil Defense, the Defense Mothers, the Bomb-a-Dears, and the Women's Volunteer Ambulance Corps increased the number of options available to women interested in volunteer work for the war effort.
QUEEN OF DEFENSE SALVAGE
AGE 13
HAS PERSONALLY BROUGHT TO HER
SCHOOL 1 1/4 TONS OF WASTE PAPER
United in Cause, Segregated by Custom

The Second World War affected one community long restricted in its mobility: St. Petersburg’s African-American citizens. Blacks and other ethnic minorities were engaged in a war within a war as they fought foreign fascism while confronting domestic racial segregation.

Political empowerment offered African Americans artillery against formidable segregation laws and customs. In December 1941, African Americans secured the right to serve on juries in Pinellas County. In 1944, the United States Supreme Court outlawed the restrictive “white primary” laws that had excluded persons of color from political participation.

Despite their loyalty to the war effort, blacks on the home front often faced intolerable conditions. A 1940 study of housing in St. Petersburg indicated that nearly 85% of the African-American population lived in substandard structures. Educational opportunities remained limited, as poorly-funded black schools lacked kindergartens or provisions for basic technical instruction that were found in better-equipped white institutions.
In late 1942, city authorities decreed "Work or Jail" edicts in an attempt to curb "indolence" and to prevent "idlers" from loafing around. This policy was rigidly enforced, exclusively in the black community through police raids of beer gardens and "jook joints". State Defense Council officials joined local law enforcement authorities in regulating wartime morality with broad, discretionary powers that encouraged "vagrancy sweeps" of African-American neighborhoods as a means of providing cheap labor.

*These are not the days to consider from whence one came, nor the traditional customs of social standing, caste, and privilege. These are the days for a united front with a united purpose to fight for victory which we must have, or regardless of caste, creed or position, we will all sink together.*

Mary McLeod Bethune

*Photograph on the next page:*

Many families committed themselves to both paid and volunteer war work in the local community. Dr. James Maxie Ponder (second from the right), the city's physician to the black community, supervised physical examinations for black army recruits.

His wife, Fannye Mae Ponder (on the far right), served as president of the State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs from 1942-1946. For her part in the war effort, Fannye traveled all over the state of Florida, selling over $300,000 worth of war bonds.

c. 1950s
Blackouts in the Sunshine City

St. Petersburg residents experienced their first trial blackout on January 2, 1942. When the signal sounded, residents were required to turn off all lights unless they had a filter-proof window shade. While buses and trains continued normal operation, private automobiles parked along the roadside during the trial period. Municipal workers extinguished streetlights along roads and bridges. After this initial blackout, city leaders enacted measures which gave them broad enforcement authority and provided sever penalties for those who violated blackout provisions.

Residents of peninsular communities blackened their headlights and keep curtains closed during the night. Vehicle owners on the barrier islands often painted their headlights so only one-half inch of the glass bulb remained clear. In an era when few structures had air conditioning, closed curtains restricted ventilation, shutting out sea breezes that made summer evenings more tolerable. Fear of enemy submarines along the Gulf Coasts, however, made blackout regulations a necessity of life. Successful antisubmarine campaigns led to the lifting of dim-out regulations by late 1943.

Photograph on the next page:

The Snell Arcade appears in the foreground of this aerial view of a blackout.
The Troops Go Home

War Clouds Disappear, Forecast Calls for Sunshine

For nearly four years, a sea of blood, sweat, and tears washed across the globe. As Allied forces secured victory in Europe and then in the Pacific, crowds filled downtown streets with joyful cheers and mounds of confetti. Days of celebration followed the war’s end in August 1945. After contributing to the war effort, residents hoped to return to the sense of normalcy (though not to the Great Depression) that World War II had so thoroughly shattered.

Soon after the war, St. Petersburg experienced a rapid demilitarization that restored the civilian fabric of the city. Only a skeletal corps of military personnel and a small contingent at the Maritime Service base remained. The Pinellas Army Air Base began service as a civilian facility. Nevertheless, the infrastructure created and modified during the war years had dramatically transformed the city. St. Petersburg would never return to its prewar “innocence.”

Photograph on the next page:

Soldiers and civilians took to the streets to celebrate the end of the war.
The legacies of World War II continue to define life in St. Petersburg to this day. While the “Sunshine City” sought to capitalize on its trademark “sun and fun,” it could never return to its prewar status as a small southern town dominated by a seasonal tourist trade.

The city experienced substantial population growth during and after the war. From a population of 60,812 in 1940, the number of residents swelled to approximately 86,000 in 1945, and to 96,848 by mid-century. In the fifty years since the end of World War II, St. Petersburg has grown to a city of nearly a quarter million residents, while the county’s population has risen to nearly one million permanent residents.

Many of the military families who first encountered St. Petersburg during the war migrated to the region. As real estate and construction industries met the demands of these new transplants, the region surrendered much of its traditional character. Another major legacy of the war was the federal G. I. Bill, which extended housing and educational opportunities to veterans. The social, political, economic, and ecological consequences of this postwar migration continue to this day.