



Punta Gorda Army Airfield 1942-1945

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Florida's flat land, open skies, and easy access to water made it a perfect training ground for the army and navy during World War II. Soon after the U.S. entry into WWII, Florida became the base for a variety of army encampments, naval facilities, and airfields. The state's unique climate and terrain made its facilities much sought after for pilot training and were used not only by the U.S., but by the Allied Nations as well. America was at war and

the task of training pilots for the U.S. Army and Navy was a huge undertaking that needed to be remedied as soon as practical. Within a year Florida had more than 40 military airfields constructed of various sizes and capabilities throughout the state.

One such facility graced the grounds of Charlotte County, The Punta Gorda Army Airfield (PGAAF). The PGAAF, presently known as the Punta Gorda Airport, is located three miles southeast of the city of Punta Gorda. In May 1942, when the site for an air field was first selected by Headquarters, U.S. Army Air Corps, it was undeveloped cattle range lands. The air field initially encompassed 225 acres of land; however more land around the air field was acquired as additional operational requirements dictated.



- October 5, 1942 - PGAAF was officially classified as an Operational Training Unit Station (Medium Bombardment) Its mission was to train pilots for overseas duty.
- October 19, 1942 - Construction began directed by Captain Henry J. Tebow, C. E.
- November 14, 1943 - first Army personnel arrived
- December 11, 1943 - Airfield activated
- December 23, 1943 - Air Base completed

"Tent City" at Punta Gorda Army Air Base
Lt Glenn Herd on right
1943



The base had 61 service buildings including 2 six-aircraft nose-dock maintenance hangars, training buildings, a Chapel-Theater Building, an Officers' Club, Mess Hall, classrooms, fire station, dispensary, and control tower. Housing for student officers and enlisted men included 268 hutments, commonly known as "Tent City" by its inhabitants. Not all of the enlisted lived on base; base officers and some upper Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) lived in private housing in Punta Gorda.

Did you know?

Army regulations dictated that "all troops...be fed the best food available in the best and most appetizing form within the realm of reasonable possibility..."

Punta Gorda Army Air Field
MESS HALL NO. 2

Sq O AAF Base Unit 344th
Organization

Sgt. Bilodeau, E.J.
Name

Grade
is not on separate rations and is authorized to eat in
Mess Hall No. 2.

31 325 070
ASN

11 JAN 1945
Date Issued

Commanding
C.J. Bilodeau
Signature of Soldier

Punta Gorda Army Airfield was a subordinate command of 3rd Air Force, 3rd Fighter Command at Drew Field (now Tampa International Airport), and also had C-45 Expeditor and C-47 Skytrain transports assigned for support. The 27th Service Group, an all-black unit, was moved from McDill Field near Tampa to provide training for support services to the air combat units.

The Army Air Corps assigned 44 officers and 1,097 enlisted men as permanent staff at the Punta Gorda Army Airfield. The first class of student pilots arrived in February 1944. Throughout the duration of the training there were two classes of students in training. Each class had two sections (502nd and 490th) in training at the same time and the duration of training was completed after 15 weeks of instruction.



Did you know?

Paratroopers carried an average of 70 pounds of equipment. Officers averaged 90 pounds of gear. With the parachute, men weighed in at 70 to 120 pounds over their body weight.

490th FIGHTER



502d FIGHTER



The average class size was 60 students. At any one time there was approximately 120 student pilots assigned to PGAAF. There were approximately 17 classes held. By the end of the operations at the base a conservative estimate of over 750 pilots were trained at PGAAF.

The pilots trained in the Curtiss P-40 Warhawk aircraft and later the P-40s were replaced with the new North American P-51 Mustang. Training in the P-40 and P-51 represented advanced phase training for Army Air Forces fighter pilots prior to their being deployed with USAAF operational units in Europe and the Pacific. In April 1944 there were a total of 103 aircraft assigned to PGAAF. The various types of aircraft were: 69 P-40 N, 1 P-40 K in repair, 7 P-40E, 1 UC-43, 2 BC-1, 6 BT-13E, 6 RA-24B, 1 RA-25A, 1 BT-13 survey, 1 UC-64A, 4 P-40 E survey, 1 UC-78, 1 BC-1 survey, 1 L-2M, and 1 L-2A survey.

According to Aviation Archaeological Investigation & Research, 135 accidents were reported in Punta Gorda associated with the flying training and air field operations. The lives of six pilots were lost in training related accidents.



P-40s



When the men stationed at PGAAF were not busy training, they enjoyed recreational activities. PGAAF official records from the Air Force Historical Research Agency at the Maxwell Air Force Base show that “hard baseball leagues” between various bases had been started as well as a softball league. The Charlotte Harbor Hotel Pool was secured for physical training for PGAAF enlisted men.



Many photos were captured of those enlisted at PGAAF enjoying their leisure time. They can be seen celebrating birthdays, enjoying each others company, and fishing among other activities.



Did you know?

These three unidentified men shown at left were German prisoners of war (POWs) at work at the PGAAF. There are no reports of POWs being held at the PGAAF base, but there were 200 housed at Venice Army Air Field.

Finally, with the surrender of Germany and the Pacific allied forces closing in on the Japanese Empire, the Army Air Corps began closing some training bases with the reduced need for replacement pilots. The Punta Gorda Army Air Field was officially deactivated on Saturday, September 1, 1945, one day before the official surrender of Japan. The Air Field was active as a military pilot training facility for a total of 631 days, or one year, eight months and 22 days.



The airport property along with the military's improvements was transferred to Charlotte County by the War Assets Administration. The facility has been an active airport since the Army Air Corps vacated the property.

Many of the men stationed at PGAAF stayed in or came back to Charlotte County after the base was closed. Many had already found housing and companionship during their time with PGAAF, or grew fond of the area. Statistics show that marriages in Charlotte County increased dramatically as servicemen often married their sweethearts near the end of training.

The Punta Gorda Army Airfield is just one of several connections that Charlotte County had to World War II.



The PGAAF impacted and strengthened our community. Servicemen living in the area increased the revenue of local businesses, and increased our permanent population and growth in the years to follow.

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Charlotte County History Services

Libraries & History Administration

2050 Forrest Nelson Blvd.

Port Charlotte, FL 33952

941.629.PAST (7278)

Office Hours: Mon-Fri 10:00AM to 5:00PM

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