

# Treasure Coast airports were military bases in World War II



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Post Time

**Readers:** From 2016 to 2020, we are marking the 75th-anniversary “window” of World War II, 1941-45, and Florida’s key role in that conflict. In addition, this week marks Memorial Day, a time to honor those who gave their all.

Today we visit two Treasure Coast locales.

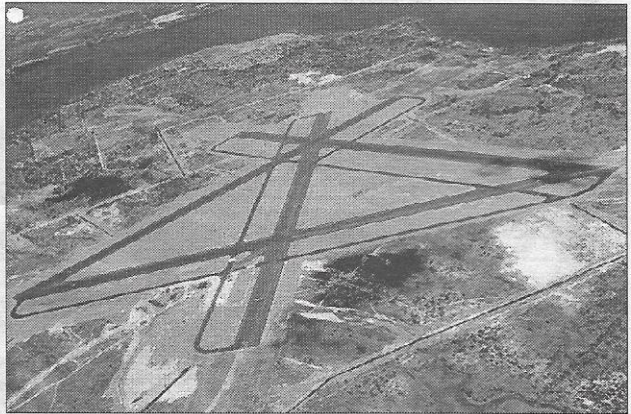
When Florida, then a quiet state of not some 2 million people, was thrown into the great war, the feds were quick to take advantage of its open space, good weather, proximity to the ocean and still inexpensive real estate. The number of bases jumped from eight in 1940 to 172 in 1943. Many were for aviation.

When the war ended, many of those boys decided this was where they wanted to live. By 1950, Florida’s population had leaped to 3 million. By 1970, it was 7 million.

On May 27, 1943, the U.S. Navy began operations at a military airport in Stuart. It is named in honor of Paul Homer Witham, a Stuart man who was killed in action in 1942.

A small strip called Krueger Field opened in 1928 at or near the Witham site. Early in World War II, landowners donated or loaned 900 acres to Martin County.

In 1942, the county leased the land to the federal government for \$800,000 for a training field. The Navy then spent



This photo from Nov. 1, 1944, shows an aerial view of what is now Witham Field in Stuart. This view shows the St. Lucie River at the top, and Sewall’s Point is at top left.

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\$10 million on the facility.

First called MacArthur Field, it was renamed for Witham, the first county aviator killed in the war. He died Aug. 8, 1942.

The airport was returned to the county in July 1947. Four years later, the county hired Grumman Aircraft Systems to run the airport in exchange for free use of the facility to build aircraft parts.

Grumman ran the airport for the next 44 years. The plant would employ as many as 1,400, building military planes and parts.

In the 1980s, 99 acres were split off and leased to the YMCA for \$1. In 1994, the property, now 726 acres, was returned to Martin County. In 1998, the runway was extended, a

move that allowed more jet traffic. After neighbors complained, in 2006, county commissioners voted to stop using the extension. In 2007, the county bought out 19 homes near the airport.

The day after the feds opened Witham Field, they took over a site near Fort Pierce for a military base. It was near where Fort Pierce had had a commercial airport since May 1935.

Navy DC-3 trainers practiced training, and Navy Scout dive attack bombers would simulate night carrier landings at the airport.

On July 22, 1947, the military leased the land back to the county for the St. Lucie County Airport. It saw little activity until the 1960s, when a terminal, hangars and private firms opened.

It later was called St. Lucie International Airport, and has since been renamed Treasure Coast International Airport.

Submit your questions to Post Time, The Palm Beach Post, 2751 S. Dixie Highway, West Palm Beach, FL 33405. Include your full name and hometown. Call 561-820-4418. EK@pbpost.com. Sorry; no personal replies.