

Clay County and the Military

Early History

The Spanish builders of Fort San Francisco de Pupa had to have no idea that they would be the first in a long line of military installations in the county.

Writing in Florida Historical Quarterly in 1951, University of Florida anthropologist John Goggin believed the fort was first mentioned in the early 18th Century. The first structure was already degrading in 1737 and was, "... little more than a sentry house." Located about three miles south of Green Cove Springs, the fort was rebuilt in the 1740s.

The colonial period is rife with conflict between Spain and England. James Oglethorpe, the founder of Georgia, led forays in Clay County in 1740. English aggression toward the Spanish was part retaliation for not returning escaped slaves and previous attacks, and partly because the two colonial powers were used to fighting.

Oglethorpe took the fort with ease after two bombardments, though Goggin wrote that a cannon blast missed Oglethorpe by a matter of feet. He moved on to the Castillo San Marco, where he was less successful.

While Oglethorpe occupied the fort with a reported 40-man garrison, he later abandoned the structure. Goggin mentions the Spanish may have occupied it again, but by the 1760s the fort was in ruins.

Years after the Spanish withdrew from Florida, American settlers in Clay County had a different problem. The second Seminole War mostly raged in Central Florida, but Gary's Ferry, near modern-day Middleburg, was an outpost in Florida's dangerous frontier.

Fort Heileman, a supply depot that grew to two dozen buildings, was in operation from 1836-1841 on the north bank of Black Creek. It was named after Lt. Julius Heileman, who died at the Battle of Micanopy in 1836.

Soldiers were frequently ambushed and beset by sickness. The Clay County Archives casualty list from the war shows at least 19 men from Gary's Ferry killed. As the Indian chiefs consolidated their forces further south, Fort Heileman became less and less necessary, supplies were funneled to Fort Shannon in Palatka, and it was eventually abandoned. But Clay would only have to wait about 20 years for the breakout of the Civil War, where Confederate forces tried to fend off a mounting Union presence.

The Union heavily outnumbered Confederate forces in the area and later assumed control of the St. Johns River. Prior to 1864, Union forces would occupy and reoccupy Jacksonville. The Middleburg Press' Tom Parham wrote in 1988 how Northeast Florida was a lawless region held barely intact by Confederate Capt. John J. Dickison.

As the Union fortified its position in Jacksonville and Fernandina they crept west into Middleburg in July of 1864. That fall, the 4th Massachusetts Cavalry established an outpost in modern-day Green Cove Springs called Magnolia, raided Middleburg, and took rebel guns in Fleming Island. Union and Confederate forces skirmished in Middleburg, Lake Asbury and most notably Halsey's Plantation.

In October of 1864, the 4th Massachusetts Cavalry was ambushed about two miles north of Penney Farms. Reports suggest the Confederates only had a couple wounded while they took 23 Union prisoners and, "...killed 10 or 12," Dickison wrote. Some of the deceased Union troops were interred in Magnolia Springs Cemetery, where they remain today.

Another setback for the Union was the civilian chartered Maple Leaf steamboat, carrying about 400 tons of equipment and baggage. It was sunk by a mine on the St. Johns River in April of 1864. It was excavated from the murky St. Johns in the late-1980s and since then was designated a National Historic Landmark.

Establishment of Camp Blanding



The establishment of Camp Blanding followed the sale of the first permanent Florida National Guard training site known as Camp Joseph E. Johnston (Camp Foster was FLNG name) to the Federal government which used the land to create Jacksonville Naval Air Station. The Armory Board chose the Kingsley Lake site to keep the training facility near Jacksonville. Just over 28,000 acres were acquired by the state of Florida between December 1939 and November 1940 by purchase or eminent domain condemnation. Money and labor for installation of water and sewer lines, as well as construction of fences and roads within the camp, were initially made available through the Work Projects Administration.

Original plans dictated by a contract between the War Department and State Armory Board called for a camp that could accommodate a regiment of infantry, but by early 1940, with a World War looming, it was decided to increase the capacity to an infantry brigade. By the end of 1940, the design was enlarged to support two infantry divisions and

various support elements. Florida's governor and the state Armory Board approved naming the complex after Major General Albert Hazen Blanding, former commander of the 31st Infantry "Dixie" Division and Chief of the National Guard Bureau.

World War II

In August 1940 Camp Blanding was federalized by US Government to be used by Army as training base for NG & Active Army Infantry Divisions. At that time, the US Government acquired around 40,000 additional acres through eminent domain to go with the Florida's 30,000. Over the next few months, they acquired leases on another 80,000 acres east of the owned land to use as maneuver area. This brings Camp Blanding to around 150,000 acres

Following mobilization of the National Guard of the United States in November 1940, the 31st and 43rd Infantry Divisions were sent to Camp Blanding for their initial organization and training.

As the number of troops billeted at Camp Blanding rapidly increased, responsibility for construction was shifted from the Quartermaster Corps to the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers, Jacksonville District.

Divisions serving time at Camp Blanding during the war included the 1st, 29th, 30th, 31st 36th, 43rd 63rd, 66th and 79th. Other units that trained there included the 508th parachute infantry regiment (separate) and the 6th cavalry regiment, 3 tank destroyer battalions, field artillery regiments and combat engineer organizations.

Beginning in June 1943 Camp Blanding started to prepare for a change in its mission. In August 1943, the last divisions departed Camp Blanding, which was immediately converted into an Infantry

Replacement Training Center. Nearly 175,000 men were trained at the IRTC.

Because of Camp Blanding's size, isolation, and moderate climate, it served as a German Prisoner of War camp from September 1942 to April 1946. More than 4,000 men – soldiers, U-Boat sailors, and civilian “enemy aliens” – were detained at Camp Blanding.

During the war, Camp Blanding was Florida's fourth largest city. It is estimated that more than 745,000 personnel served at Camp Blanding during World War II.

Today

Camp Blanding Joint Training Center (CBJTC) is the National Guard's premier training site in North Florida. The 73,000-acre post provides resources to enhance joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational training in support of our nation, state, and communities.

Crystal Lake Army Airfield, Camp Blanding

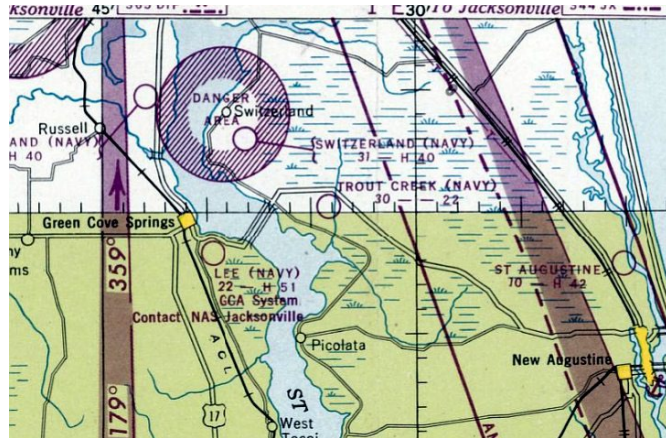
The Crystal Lake Army Airfield at Camp Blanding was constructed in 1942 by the United States Army Air Forces (the US Air Force did not yet exist), on the Southwest perimeter of Camp Blanding. It was originally named as Crystal Lake Army Airfield, due to its proximity to Crystal Lake, but when commissioned in December of that same year it became known as the Keystone Army Airfield.

During World War II, the field was the home of the AAFSAT Strategic Reconnaissance School. The F3 Havoc, P39D Air Cobra, and L-2 and L-3 Grasshopper Light Observation Aircraft were some of the Aircraft utilized for training. In November of 1943, the 313th Fighter Squadron moved from Alachua and employed P40 Warhawks for training. Later, the P40s were replaced with P47 Thunderbolts. In January 1945, the AAFSAT sent down orders for closure and on February 1, 1945, the field was placed on inactive status.

From its inception to the present day, various branches of the Military continue to utilize the Airport for various training exercises throughout the year including parachute training and recurrence training, night vision approaches, equipment drops and mobilization, utilizing Rotary Wing and Fixed Wing Aircraft. Runway 5-23 can support aircraft weighing up to 150,000 lbs. and periodically we have C-130 aircraft using our runway and ramp area for operations. We also have a couple private corporations (tenants) that provide some military, and paramilitary, training through Government contracts.

Camp Blanding's Joint Training Operations Center is the alternate Emergency Operations Center (EOC) for the State of Florida in the event that the primary EOC in Tallahassee needs to be evacuated. Camp Blanding may use the Airfield for operations, and logistics before, or during, events such as natural disasters, hurricanes, etc.

U.S. Navy



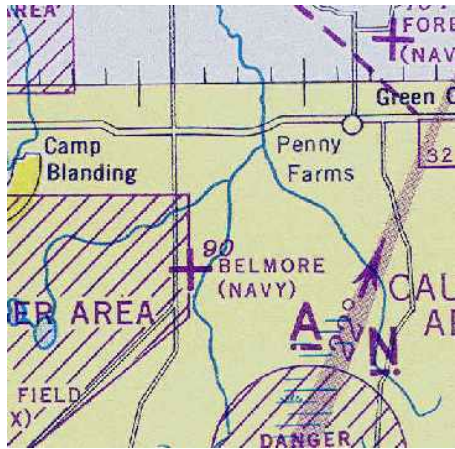
Naval Air Station (NAS) Lee Field

In September 1940, the U.S. Navy opened Naval Air Station Lee Field in honor of Ensign Benjamin Lee who had lost his life in a crash at Killingholme, England during World War I. In

August 1943, the facility was renamed Naval Air Station Green Cove Springs (Lee Field). After the war, NAS Green Cove Springs was downgraded in status to a Naval Auxiliary Air Station (NAAS) as part of the greater NAS Jacksonville complex.



Squadron of SNJ-3's preparing for take off at NAAS Lee Field in Green Cove Springs, Fl. ca. 1943



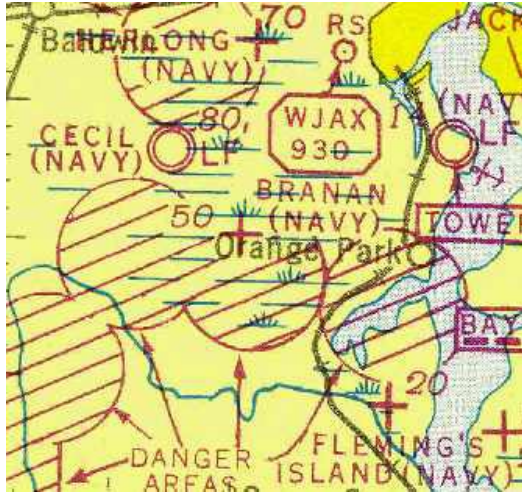
Belmore Naval Outer Landing Field (NOLF)

This former military airfield was one of many satellite airfields used during WW2 by NAS Jacksonville.

It depicted Belmore as a grass field, similar in shape to a baseball diamond.

According to WW2-era Navy memos as of April 1944 Belmore NOLF was assigned to NAAS Green Cove Springs for Maintenance purposes. Belmore was not being used by late 1945. However, unlike many other small WW2-era military auxiliary airfields Belmore was a Navy owned field & was declared "surplus-retained".





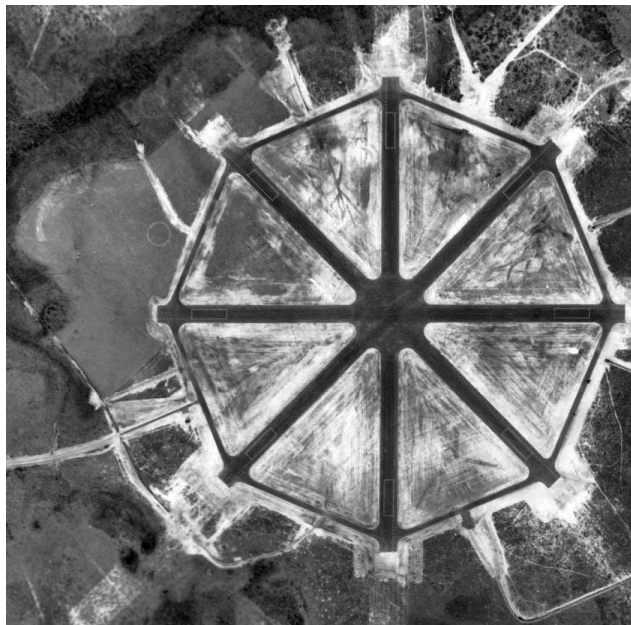
Branan Naval Outer Landing Field (NOLF)

During the period just before WW2, the Department of the Navy began identifying parcels of land suitable for use in support of NAS Jacksonville.

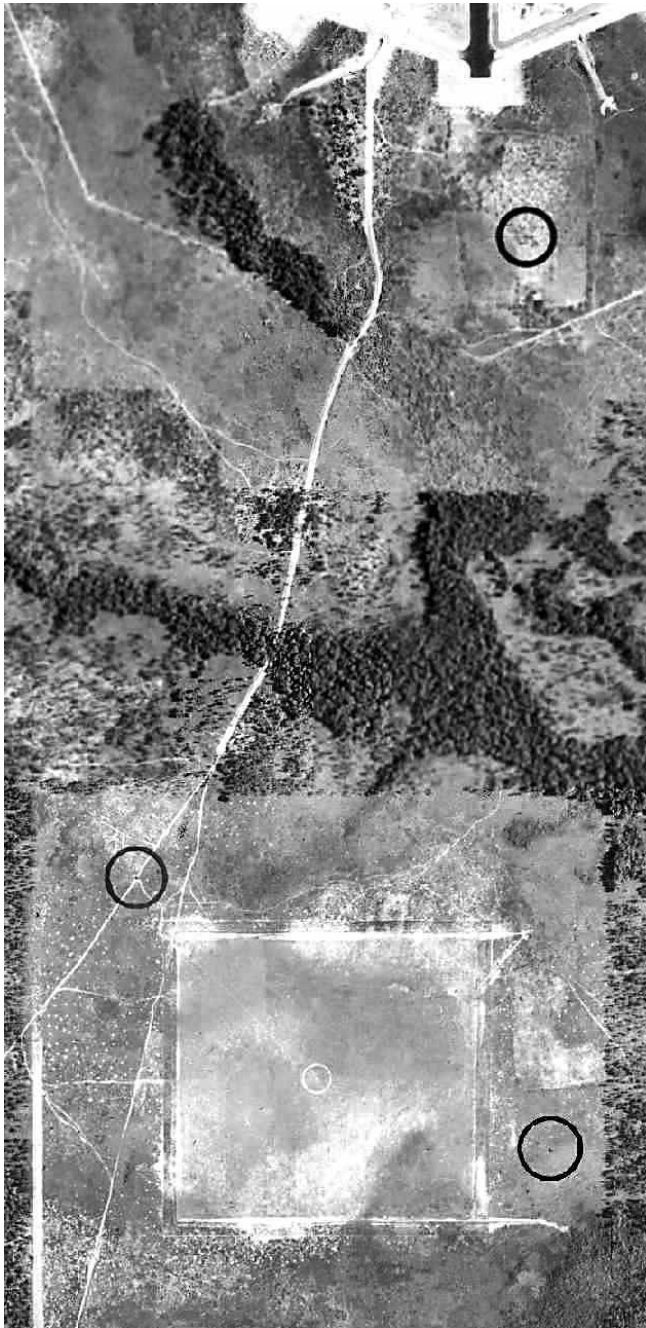
Among those selected included the Branan's land, in part, because of its close proximity to NAS Jacksonville & an outlying field - Cecil Field, which stood northwest of the Branan's property.

Because of the changing demands for training...and the change in mission for NAS Jacksonville, the training fields changed as well.

The grass field was used by the primary training aircraft until the station's mission changed & the hard-surface runways were added in mid-1943. The airfield at Branan had a unique configuration – consisting of 4 paved 4,000' runways, which all intersected at the same point, with the ends of the runways ringed by a taxiway.



A large, cleared area approximately one mile south of Branan NOLF was



used as the Spencer Bomb Target, for dive bombers.

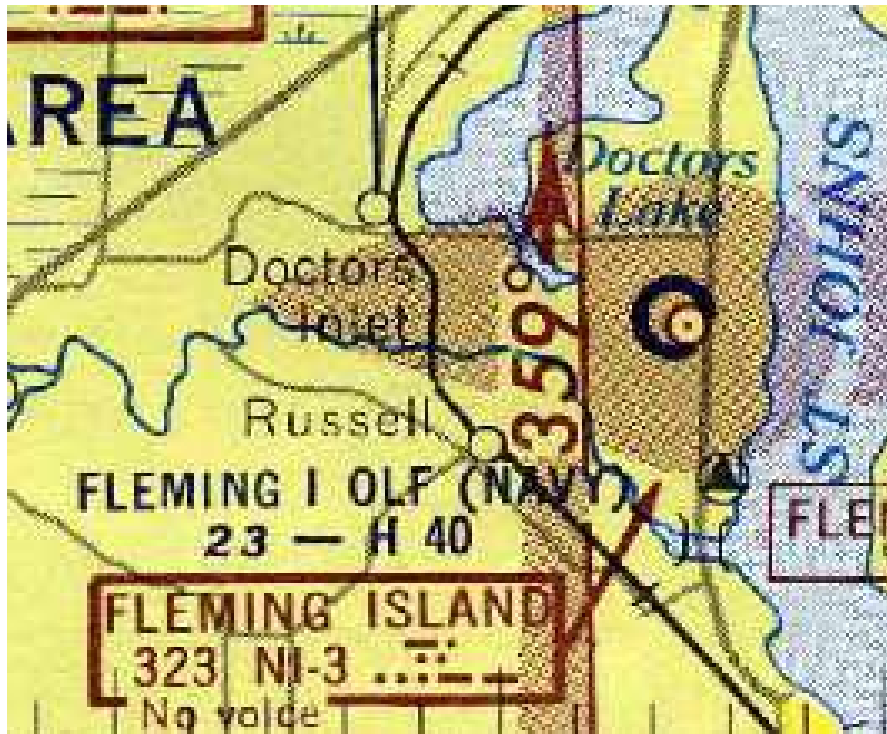
Following the Second World War, Branan Field was used for the development of the US Navy Flight Demonstration Squadron, later to be known as the "Blue Angels".

Although NAS Jacksonville is listed as the birthplace of the Blue Angels, most of the preliminary training was done at Branan in private.

The peculiar geometry of Branan Field made it particularly suitable for training by the Blue Angels - the large symmetrical shape of Branan Field with its convergence of runways facilitated visualization by pilots approaching a single central spot from various compass points in jet aircraft. Branan Field was abandoned at an unknown point

after 1949.

Branan NOLF had its asphalt removed in 1953 for use in the conversion of nearby Cecil Field to a Master Jet Base. The Navy sold the land soon after.



Fleming Island Naval Outer Landing Field (NOLF)

This WW2-era military airfield was built as a satellite airfield for Jacksonville NAS.

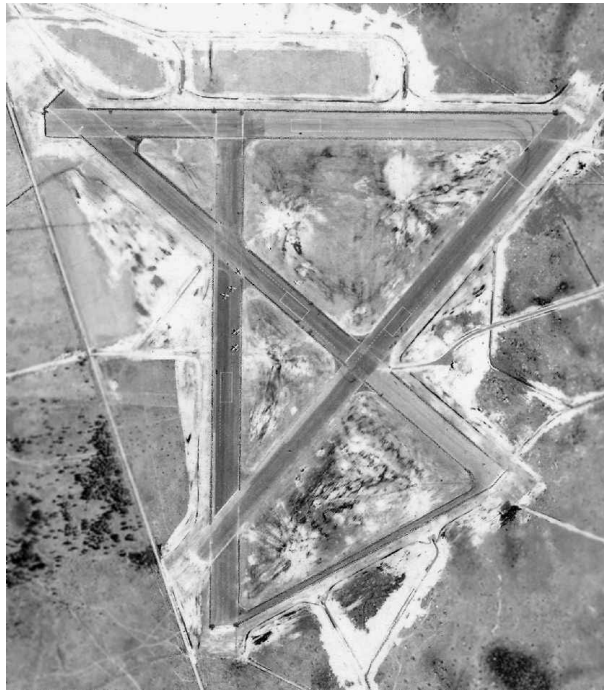
Fleming's Island NOLF in its original configuration, built to support primary flight training, with an irregularly shaped grass airfield, with an airfield circle marking in the center.

At some point between 1942-43, Fleming's Island NOLF was completely transformed into its "2nd generation" configuration, with 4 paved runways. The airfield was completely changed when the mission of NAS Jacksonville shifted away from primary training in 1942.

In the case of Flemings Island NOLF, the airfield was modified after the paved runways were added when the field – which was used for Field Carrier Landing Practice (FCLP) - received equipment for practicing landings on carriers with arresting wires.

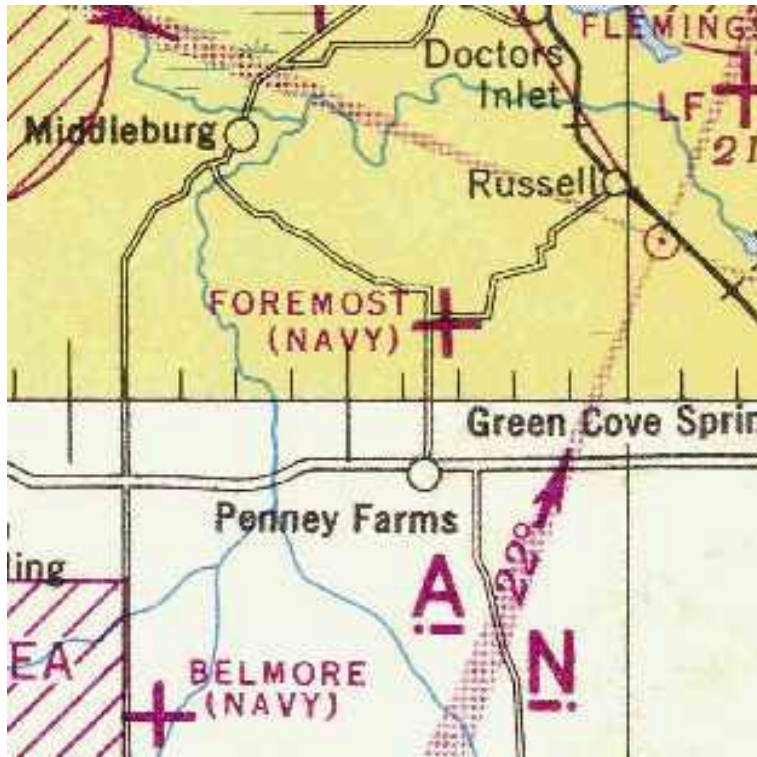
As of 1965 the northern runway was being reused for drag racing, known as Thunderbolt Dragway. Local racers insist the name came from a large stockpiling of P-47s [Thunderbolts] on the NOLF before it was decommissioned.

Fleming Island NOLF 1943



Fleming Island NOLF 2016





Foremost Naval Outer Landing Field (NOLF)

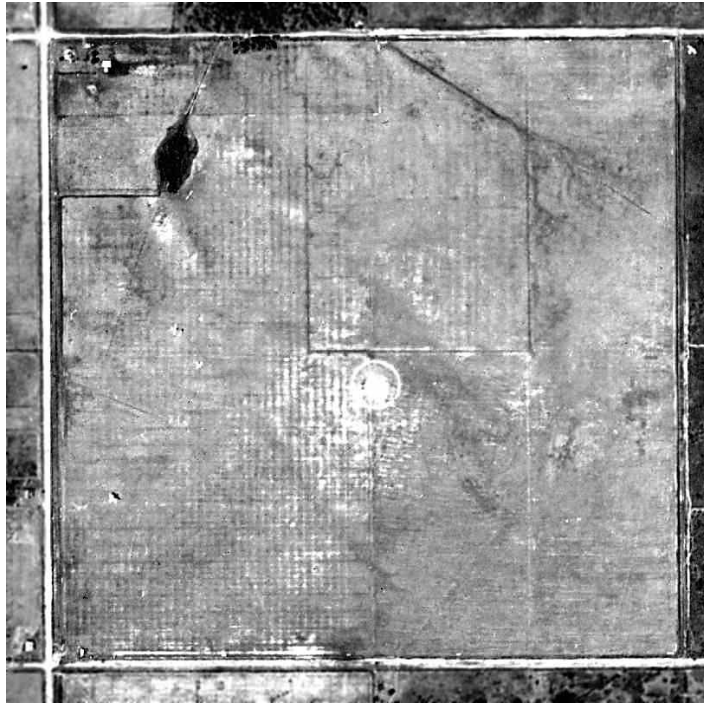
This airfield was established during WW2, as one of the many satellite airfields used to support Navy flight training in the Jacksonville area.

The date of construction of the Foremost airfield has not been determined.

An April 27, 1944, Navy memo described Foremost Field an outlying field assigned to NAAS Green Cove Springs (located a few miles to the east).

Foremost was not listed among active airfields in the April 1944 US Army/Navy Directory of Airfields, due to its status as a relatively small airfield. As with most of the NOLFs, it was not needed after the war, and by November 1945, it had been declared surplus property.

Foremost NOLF 1943



Foremost NOLF 2016





Middleburg Naval Outer Landing Field (NOLF)

This small airport was established at some point between 1935-37. It described Middleburg as an auxiliary airfield, located 2 miles northeast of the town of Middleburg.

The December 1944 US Army & Navy Directory of Airfields described Middleburg NOLF as being assigned to NAS Jacksonville and described the field as having 2 sod runways, in an "L" shape, measuring 3,200' north/south & east/west.

According to Navy property documents, Middleburg was listed as being 'inactive' by 1945 and no longer showed up on the property list for NAS Jacksonville by June 1948.

Middleburg NOLF 1943



Middleburg NOLF 1999



U.S. Naval Atlantic Reserve

Just months after the Japanese surrendered in August 1945, the Navy downgraded the base to an auxiliary base for Jacksonville Naval Air Station and became known as Florida Group, Atlantic Reserve Fleet.

Soon, hundreds of ships built for the war, but not currently needed, began arriving in Green Cove Springs.

At the end of the war with Germany and Japan, the U.S. and Soviet Union began their standoff. The ships were nearly new, and the Navy wasn't about to scrap them when the fears of another war against the Soviet Union loomed large.

The solution was to find a calm, freshwater port, and "mothball" the ships by sealing their guns in plastic, putting dehumidifiers inside then, chipping the old paint off and repainting them with sealant.





Most of the ships were destroyer escorts and patrol boats, but there were also many LSTs that carried cargo and troops across oceans.

When the Cold War against communism blossomed in late 1950 when North Korea invaded its neighbors to the south, about 150 of the ships were reactivated.

In the years after the war, the ships remained growing older and obsolete.

"In March 1961, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara announced that it would be closing the reserve fleet activities at Green Cove Springs," according to the National Archives.