

## American Gibraltar: Key West during World War II

by Abraham H. Gibson

As visitors and locals alike will attest, there is no other place in America quite like Key West. Separated from the Florida peninsula by more than a hundred miles, the island city lies closer to Havana than Miami. The archipelago to which it belongs not only boasts the only tropical climate in the lower forty-eight, but also features flora and fauna found nowhere else on Earth. Even the ground underfoot is unique. A mere hundred thousand years ago, Key West was not only underwater, but alive. Its entire surface teemed with millions of tiny coral which slowly built the island's limestone bedrock over countless millennia.

And yet, despite its quirks, Key West just may be the most American city of all. Throughout its remarkable history, the island city has provided a curiously consistent microcosmic view of the greater United States. What is more, the city's insular nature exaggerates national trends, rendering Key West an island of extremes. The effect is most pronounced during the nation's sharpest turns of fortune. When the United States enjoyed its greatest burst of economic expansion during the fabled Gilded Age, no other city in the nation boasted more wealth per capita than Key West.<sup>1</sup> Rooted in a thriving cigar industry, the island's

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1. Maureen Ogle, *Key West: History of an Island of Dreams* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006), 84; Gary Boulard, "‘State of Emergency’: Key West in the Great Depression," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, 67, no. 2 (1988), 169.

economy added scores of factories, thousands of jobs, and millions of dollars. But if Key West enjoyed exaggerated wealth during the good years, its want was no less extreme during the bad ones. When the nation's economy crumbled during the Great Depression, no other city fell further than Key West. The island lost all of its industry, most of its jobs, and a third of its population. Significantly, the response to this crisis likewise amplified national trends, as the Roosevelt administration poured New Deal money into the city with a singularly intense focus. While federal assistance ameliorated the city's moribund economy, Key West soon discovered (as did the rest of the nation) that nothing transforms an economy like world war.

Although Key West has attracted its share of historians, none have focused exclusively on the island's development during World War II. To be sure, several have studied Key West during the 1930s. Garry Boulard examines the city's crushing poverty during the Great Depression, for example, while Durward Long details its inspiring rebound during the New Deal. But neither historian addresses the still more radical events of the early 1940s.<sup>2</sup> Other histories mention the war, but only within a larger context. Clayton Roth, Jr. reviews 150 years of defense at Key West, but his broad approach affords World War II scarcely two pages.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Maureen Ogle provides an authoritative history of the island spanning several hundred years, but World War II comprises only a fraction of her narrative.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, historians of World War II have long recognized the war's profound influence on the American home front, but they have generally paid Key West little heed.<sup>5</sup> A growing number

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2. See Boulard, "State of Emergency," 166-183; Durward Long, "Key West and the New Deal, 1934-1936," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, 46, no. 3 (1968): 209-218; William C. Barnet, "Inventing the Conch Republic: The Creation of Key West as an Escape from Modern America," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, 88, no. 2 (2009): 139-172.

3. Clayton D. Roth, "150 Years of Defense Activity at Key West, 1820-1970," *Tequesta*, no. XXX (1970): 33-51.

4. Ogle, *Key West*.

5. There is a large historiography addressing the American home front during World War II, including: Allan M. Winkler, *Home Front, U. S. A.: America during World War II* (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1986); Stephen Ambrose, *Americans at War* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997); John Jeffries, *Wartime America: the World War II Home Front* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 1996); William L. O'Neill, *A Democracy at War: America's Fight at Home and Abroad in World War II* (New York: Free Press, 1993); John M. Blum, *V Was for Victory: Politics and American Culture during World War II* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1976); Richard Polenberg, *War and Society: the United States, 1941-1945* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972).

have highlighted the war's unique impact on the American South, though most have overlooked its effect on the region's southernmost frontier.<sup>6</sup> Gary Mormino references the island city in his excellent study of Florida during World War II, but his analysis of Key West is limited by his statewide scope.<sup>7</sup> Daniel Hutchinson discusses Key West in considerable detail in his recent dissertation, though his interests are otherwise much broader.<sup>8</sup> His research reveals that military bases transformed communities throughout the South (among them Key West), and that fissures often appeared along similar political, racial, and gendered lines.

Like other "war-boom communities," Key West endured a number of radical changes during the Second World War.<sup>9</sup> When

6. Neil R. McMillen, ed., *Remaking Dixie: the Impact of World War II on the American South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997); Pete Daniel, "Going among Strangers: Southern Reactions to World War II," *The Journal of American History* 77, no. 3 (1990): 886-911; Morton Sosna, "More Important than the Civil War? The Impact of World War II on the South," *Perspectives on the American South: an Annual Review of Society, Politics, and Culture* 4, ed. James C. Cobb and Charles Reagan Wilson (New York: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1987), 150-153; Morton Sosna, "The GI's South and the North-South Dialogue in World War II," in *Developing Dixie: Modernization in a Traditional Society*, ed. William B. Moore, Jr., Joseph F. Tripp, and Lyon G. Tyler, Jr. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1988), 311-326.
7. Gary R. Mormino, "World War II," in *The New History of Florida*, ed. Michael Gannon (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996). Others addressing Florida on a statewide level during World War II include: Glenn Ferguson, "Florida State Defense: Civilians and Civilian Defense in World War II," (Ph.D. diss., Florida State University 1999); Gary R. Mormino, "GI Joe Meets Jim Crow: Racial Violence and Reform in World War II Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, 73, no. 1 (1994): 23-42; Ben F. Rogers, "Florida in World War II: Tourists and Citrus," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, 39, no. 1 (1960): 34-41.
8. Daniel Hutchinson, "Sites of Contention: Military Bases and the Transformation of the American South during World War II," (Ph.D. diss., Florida State University, 2011).
9. Many of the foundational works addressing the effects of World War II on specific communities appeared soon after the war, including: Robert J. Havighurst and H. Gerton Morgan, *The Social History of a War-Boom Community* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1951); Charles F. Marsh, *The Hampton Roads Communities in World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1951); Marvin W. Schlegel, *Conscripted City: Norfolk in World War II* (Norfolk, VA: Norfolk War History Commission, 1951). More recently, several works have addressed Florida communities during World War II, including: Gary Mormino, "Midas Returns: Miami goes to War, 1941-1945," *Tequesta*, LVII (1997): 5-52; Eileen J. Babb, "Women and War: St. Petersburg Women during World War II," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, 73, no. 1 (1994): 43-61; David J. Coles, "'Hell-By-The-Sea': Florida's Camp Gordon Johnston in World War II," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, 73, no. 1 (1994): 1-22; James, R. McGovern, "Pensacola, Florida: a Military City in the New South," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, 59, no. 1 (1980): 24-41.

the war began, the Key West Naval Operating Base occupied just 50 acres on the northwestern edge of the island.<sup>10</sup> By the end of the war, it sprawled across more than 3,200 acres. The navy spent over \$70 million in Key West during the course of the war, and more than 14,000 ships passed through the island's harbor. It was a dizzying time, when the number of people living on the island doubled and sometimes tripled the pre-war population.<sup>11</sup> Yet Key West soon discovered (as did the rest of the nation) that the wartime boom offered mixed blessings.

### Shifting Winds of Fortune (1823-1939)

The United States Navy first established a presence at Key West in 1823, when there were approximately one hundred people living on the island.<sup>12</sup> Pirates dominated the Florida Straits, much to the chagrin of the young republic. In response to this menace, the U.S. Navy established an anti-piracy campaign based at Key West, granting Commodore David Porter command over "the most remote settlement of the southern frontier." Under Porter's direction, a squadron of swift vessels (known as the "Mosquito Fleet") pursued and attacked pirate ships operating in the waters between Florida and Cuba.<sup>13</sup> Sometimes engaging in hand-to-hand combat, Porter and his squadron eliminated piracy from the region in less than a year.<sup>14</sup> Reflecting on his experience in a report he filed with the War Department in 1829, Porter declared the harbor at Key West "the best harbor within the limits of the United States, or its territories, to the south of the Chesapeake." Seven years at sea had convinced him that "the advantages of its location as a military and naval station have no equal except in Gibraltar."<sup>15</sup>

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10. Before proceeding, a note of clarification is warranted. Given Key West's strategic importance during World War II, the navy maintained dozens of autonomous offices at Key West, among them the Naval Air Station, the Sound School, and the Naval Hospital. Each prong fell under the jurisdiction of the Key West Naval Operating Base. Therefore, unless otherwise noted, allusions to the "naval base" refer to this broadest entity.
  11. J. R. Mickler, *Key West in World War II: A History of the Naval Station and the Naval Operating Base* (Key West, FL: Naval Station and Naval Operating Base, 1945), i.
  12. Ogle, *Key West: History of an Island of Dreams*, 15.
  13. Frederick Davis, "Pioneer Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, 25, no. 1 (1946): 64-66.
  14. Ogle, *Key West: History of an Island of Dreams*, 15.
  15. David Porter, "Letter to Congress, December 29, 1829," *Public Documents Printed by Order of the Senate of the United States, First Session of the Twenty-Fourth Congress*, vol. V, doc. no. 359 (December 7, 1835), 13-15.

As Key West's population crept steadily upward over the next hundred years, war visited the island several more times. Although Florida seceded from the Union in 1861, federal troops retained control of Fort Zachary Taylor in Key West throughout the Civil War, assisting in the blockade of Southern ports.<sup>16</sup> During the 1870s, thousands of Cubans took refuge on the island while their nearby homeland was engaged in the bloody Ten Years' War.<sup>17</sup> In the late 1890s, the United States was drawn into war with Spain when the *Maine* (which had sailed from Key West) exploded in Havana harbor. Bodies recovered from the scene were brought to Key West and buried in the city cemetery. In the weeks thereafter, every available vessel was sent to Key West, which played a vitally important role in the Spanish-American War.<sup>18</sup> Reflecting on his participation in the blockade of Havana, Commodore William H. Beehler championed the island's strategic importance and harkened Porter's century-old comparison. "This should be the American Gibraltar," he wrote in 1910. "As England has secured domination over Europe by means of her strategic base at Gibraltar," Beehler continued, "so must we adopt this geographical position for the command of the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean Sea, and all the approaches to the Panama Canal, at the southern point of the United States."<sup>19</sup>

Although Key West had reaped benefits each time the nation went to war, the strategically located island found itself in an especially fortunate position just prior to the First World War. In 1912, workers with Henry Flagler's Florida East Coast Railway finished construction of the Over-Sea Railroad, an engineering marvel that stretched across more than 120 miles of islands and water, allowing trade between Key West and the mainland to

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16. Jefferson Beale Brown, *Key West: the Old and the New* (St. Augustine, FL: The Record Company, 1912), 90-98.
  17. Antonio Rafael de la Cova, "Cuban Exiles in Key West during the Ten Years' War, 1868-1878," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, 89, no. 3 (2011): 287-319; Gerald Poyo, "Key West and the Cuban Ten Years War," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, 57, no. 3 (1979): 289-307; Consuelo E. Stebbins, "The Cuban Insurgent Colony of Key West, 1868-1895," *Tequesta*, no. LXVI (2006): 5-27.
  18. William J. Schellings, "Key West and the Spanish American War," *Tequesta*, no. XX (1960): 19-29; Ogle, *Key West: History of an Island of Dreams*, 102-109; Brown, *Key West: the Old and the New*, 144-146.
  19. William H. Beehler, "The American Gibraltar," *The Journal of the Military Service Institution of the United States* (1910), 235. Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida

flourish.<sup>20</sup> Its significance cannot be overstated; for the first time since the Pleistocene, the Florida Keys were again peninsular. Meanwhile, Key West also benefited from the completion of the Panama Canal, roughly one thousand miles to the south (Figure 1). “With the opening of the Panama Canal a few weeks ago, Key West has begun to feel an increase in shipping to and from this port,” city boosters proclaimed in 1914. Traffic increased dramatically in the years thereafter, as the Great War placed unprecedented demands on resource mobilization.<sup>21</sup> Although the battlefield never approached the shores of Key West, the navy established both a submarine basin and an air-patrol station on the island. In short order, “The city was filled to overflowing not only with military personnel but with families of servicemen and tourists.”<sup>22</sup>

While the island’s reliance on defense spending reaped high rewards during times of war, it left the city economically exposed during times of peace. Difficulties began in 1926, when the collapse of the real-estate boom dragged Florida into the Great Depression several years earlier than other parts of the country.<sup>23</sup> The challenges were further exacerbated when the navy, motivated by economic pressures and adhering to isolationist policies, deactivated its base at Key West in 1930.<sup>24</sup> If the island city enjoyed exaggerated wealth during fat years, its suffering was likewise extreme during lean ones. “Few Florida communities were as severely affected by the depression as was Key West,” writes historian Durward Long.<sup>25</sup>

But the navy did not bear exclusive responsibility for the decline of Key West. A host of other factors also contributed. For example, new tariffs prompted pineapple canners to abandon their operations in the Keys, the once-robust sponging industry left Key West in favor of more fertile grounds in Tarpon Springs, and even the city’s long-established cigar industry moved its operations to Tampa.<sup>26</sup> In just ten years, the city lost more than 14,000 pay-rolled

20. George Chapin, *Key West Extension of the Florida East Coast Railway: Official Program and Souvenir* (St. Augustine, FL: The Record Company, 1912). Special Collections, Florida State University.

21. J.A. Willis, *New and Greater Key West* (St. Augustine, FL: The Record Company, 1914), 4. Special Collections, Florida State University.

22. Louise White and Nora Smiley, *History of Key West* (St. Petersburg, FL: Great Outdoors Publishing, 1959), 70.

23. Long, “Key West and the New Deal,” 209.

24. “Army and Navy: Key West Closed,” *Time*, October 6, 1930, 16.

25. Long, “Key West and the New Deal,” 209.

26. “States and Cities: At Caya Hueso,” *Time*, July 16, 1934, 13.





jobs.<sup>27</sup> Not surprisingly, the population plummeted accordingly. Though 18,749 residents had lived in Key West in 1920, just 12,831 of them remained ten years later.<sup>28</sup> By 1934, half of the city relied on federal assistance for survival. As *Time* magazine reported, "Poverty has whipped Key West to its knees."<sup>29</sup>

Overwhelmed by their city's plight, desperate Key West officials petitioned the state for emergency assistance on July 2, 1934.<sup>30</sup> In response Governor David Sholz placed the city under the jurisdiction of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA). Julius Stone, the FERA administrator charged with rehabilitating the city, emphasized the city's tourism potential. "The thing to do," he announced, "is to make Key West so attractive as to revive the tourist trade." Indeed, while Porter and Beehler compared Key West to Gibraltar, Stone invoked comparisons to another oceanic landmark. "Key West should be the Bermuda of America," he proclaimed.<sup>31</sup>

That summer, FERA initiated an unprecedented recovery program in Key West. Dubbed "the New Deal in miniature" by *Harper's Monthly*, the government poured money into repairing the city's vernacular architecture and fostering its aesthetic appeal.<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, citizens volunteered thousands of hours of free labor.<sup>33</sup> Their hard work paid immediate dividends. In February 1935, locals welcomed 8,580 visitors to the city, double the busiest month of 1934.<sup>34</sup> Not everyone agreed with the FERA plan, however. "If the government really wants to rehabilitate Key West," Victor Moffat wrote in an open letter to Julius Stone, "all they have to do is transfer 5,000 service men here, and keep that number here." As Moffat explained, "this island has always been a military island."<sup>35</sup> Others resented the government's plan for different reasons.

27. Boulard, "State of Emergency," 168-169.

28. *The Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940*, Part I, US Bureau of the Census (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1942), 212.

29. "States and Cities: At Caya Hueso," *Time*, July 16, 1934, 13.

30. "Key West asks aid in Economic Crisis," *New York Times*, July 5, 1934, 19.

31. "States and Cities: At Caya Hueso," *Time*, July 16, 1934, 13.

32. Quoted in Boulard, "State of Emergency," 175. For more on Key West's extraordinary transformation into a destination mecca, see: Barnett, "Inventing the Conch Republic," 139-172.

33. Long, "Key West and the New Deal," 214.

34. Albert C. Manucy and Joe Hale, "Three Key West Winter Seasons, 1934-1936" (Key West: n. p., 1936), 3, Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

35. V. R. Moffat, "Attention - Uncle Sam," *Florida Motorist* (October, 1934), 28.



Writing to a friend in early 1935, Katy Dos Passos complained that “the New Dealers are here (and) have stirred up all the old art trash and phoney uplifters that sank to the bottom after the war.” She reported with pity and disgust that sight-seeing tours invited out-of-towners to gawk at the house where Ernest Hemingway still lived.<sup>36</sup>

Though Hemingway likewise disparaged FERA’s efforts, he forgot such trivial complaints when a category-five hurricane pounded the Florida Keys on Labor Day, 1935. Registering the lowest barometric reading in North American history, the hurricane made landfall on Craig Key, just south of Lower Matecumbe, halfway between Key West and Miami.<sup>37</sup> The storm killed more than 400 people on the sparsely populated islands, many of them World War I veterans who had been working on an overseas roadway. Hemingway, who assisted in the recovery, described the carnage in a letter to a friend. “It was as bad as the war,” he wrote, but “worse really because (it was) so stupid and avoidable.”<sup>38</sup> Aside from the horrific loss of life, the hurricane also devastated the fledgling tourism trade in Key West. Its tracks badly damaged by the storm, the Over-sea Railroad ceased operation in 1935, leaving the city’s 13,000 inhabitants “virtually stranded.” Some estimates suggested that half of the island’s population would relocate when WPA projects ceased, although there was “vague talk” of the state appropriating the railroad’s old right-of-way and converting it into a roadway for automobiles. “Unless it does so,” *Time* magazine reported, “Key West, the last jewel inserted in the Flagler crown of empire, is liable to become a ghost city, reverting to sand & sea.”<sup>39</sup>

### “The Rumble of a Distant Drum” (1939-1941)

As many had predicted, the state of Florida bought the remnants of the Over-sea Railroad in 1936. Over the next two years, workers converted several railway bridges into roadway bridges for vehicular traffic, thereby reestablishing a vital artery with the mainland.

36. Linda Patterson Miller, *Letters from the Lost Generation: Gerald and Sara Murphy and Friends* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), 109-110.

37. Thomas Neil Knowles, *Category 5: the 1935 Labor Day Hurricane* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009), 196; Willie Drye, *Storm of the Century: the Labor Day Hurricane of 1935* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2002), 156-157.

38. Miller, *Letters from the Lost Generation*, 143.

39. “Abandoned Keys,” *Time*, February 24, 1936, 63-64.

The road promised to give the recovery process a significant boost. When the Overseas Highway was finally completed in April 1938, the United States possessed seventy percent of the world's automobiles.<sup>40</sup> Newspapers across the nation celebrated the easy access to the Keys' famed fishing grounds, and heralded the novelty of "saltwater travel by automobile."<sup>41</sup> Visited by 35,000 tourists during the previous three years, the island welcomed 1,100 automobiles on the highway's first day of operation.<sup>42</sup>

The Overseas Highway received its best coverage, however, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt traveled down its lanes in an open-air convertible less than a year after it opened. This was not his first trip to the Florida Keys. He had first visited the islands in 1917, when he was Assistant Secretary of the Navy.<sup>43</sup> Roosevelt returned several times throughout the 1920s, fishing and swimming from a houseboat he owned (Figure 2).<sup>44</sup> It was official business, however, that prompted the President's stylish return to Key West in early 1939. After a brief tour of the city he helped rehabilitate, Roosevelt planned to board the cruiser *Houston* in order to observe a series of naval war games titled Fleet Problem XX, which were already in progress.<sup>45</sup> Despite these stated intentions, the press suspected otherwise. Roosevelt's fishing prowess was well known, and reporters predicted his working vacation would entail more vacation than work. "The official reason assigned for the President's cruise at this time is his desire to see the fleet maneuvers," the *New York Times* reported, but "it is likely that President Roosevelt will do more fishing than study of naval games."<sup>46</sup>

On the contrary, the President had every reason to take the war games very seriously. Just days earlier, Germany had launched a 35,000-ton battleship named *Bismarck*, "the largest and heaviest

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40. A. A. Hoehling, *Home Front, U.S.A.* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1966), 47.

41. Harris G. Sims, "Down Florida's Bright Trails," *New York Times*, January 15, 1939, xx.

42. "Transport: Last Resort," *Time*, Monday, April 11, 1938, 50.

43. Elliot Roosevelt, ed., *FDR: His Personal Letters, 1905-1928* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1948), 343.

44. Roosevelt actually co-owned the houseboat, *Laroco*, with his longtime friend, John Lawrence. His visit to the Florida Keys in 1923 helped convince him of water's therapeutic qualities (more than a year before his first visit to Warm Springs, Georgia). Elliot Roosevelt, ed., *FDR: His Personal Letters*, 534-609.

45. Albert A. Nofi, *To Train the Fleet for War: the U. S. Navy Fleet Problems, 1923-1940* (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 2010), 229-250.

46. "President Leaves for Cruiser Trip," *New York Times*, February 17, 1939, 7.



Figure 2. Franklin D. Roosevelt in Florida, 1926. Franklin Delano Roosevelt helped reel in this 500-pound jewfish while fishing in the Florida Keys on March 21, 1926. *Image courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum Marist College, Hyde Park, New York.*

warship ever completed by any European nation.”<sup>47</sup> The ship was unveiled with significant fanfare before most of the nation’s highest-ranking government and military officials.<sup>48</sup> The launching of the *Bismarck* was but the latest grandiose gesture from an increasingly hostile German state. Other nations responded to this type of ratcheting in kind. Whereas the world had spent only \$4 billion on instruments of war in 1933, armament spending exceeded \$17 billion in 1938.<sup>49</sup> Soon after arriving in Key West, the President and a caravan that included Admiral William D. Leahy, Chief of Naval Operations, proceeded immediately to the island’s naval facilities. The buildings had deteriorated badly since Roosevelt’s initial visit twenty years earlier. Now, troubling reports from abroad prompted him to reassess the base’s strategic importance. As he toured the grounds of the deserted base, the *Bismarck* was no doubt fresh in his memory.

Before boarding the *Houston*, Roosevelt performed at least one ceremonial duty. Sitting in the back of a convertible on the streets of Key West, the President made a special radio address opening the World’s Fair in San Francisco, which showcased the city’s brand new Golden Gate Bridge.<sup>50</sup> Sporting a sunburned face, the President later spoke to members of the press, brushing aside questions about whom he would appoint to succeed Justice Louis Brandeis on the Supreme Court.<sup>51</sup> When reporters asked Roosevelt if he looked forward to fishing, he replied in the affirmative, but also indicated that developments in Europe might hasten his return sooner than he would like. The President did not elaborate, and reporters were left guessing what he meant. Though smiling for the cameras, Roosevelt displayed an “obvious concern over the possibility of a new international crisis.”<sup>52</sup>

The President’s off-the-cuff comment raised eyebrows on the docks of Key West and made headlines across the nation. William Borah, renowned isolationist senator from Idaho and oldest

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47. Jack Brower, *Battleship Bismarck* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2005), 6.

48. *Ibid.*, 8.

49. “More Arms: Billions for Defense,” *New York Times*, February 19, 1939, 65.

50. Jack James and Earle Weller, *Treasure Island: ‘the Magic City,’ 1939-1940, the Story of the Golden Gate International Exposition* (San Francisco: Pisani Printing and Publishing Company, 1941), 67; See also “President Leaves for Cruiser Trip,” *New York Times*, February 17, 1939, 7.

51. Felix Belair, Jr., “Roosevelt Enters Zone of War Game,” *New York Times*, February 21, 1939, 1.

52. “Crisis may Hasten Roosevelt Return,” *New York Times*, February 19, 1939, 34.

member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, tried to assure concerned citizens that they had nothing to fear from turmoil in Europe. "What could that possibly have to do with us?" he asked. "I venture to say," he continued, "that the totalitarian nations will not put forth any threat against the United States or affecting the United States which need shorten the President's visit a single hour." The senator concluded that "the people of Europe are more and more for peace. They are less and less disturbed by war-bluffing speeches of the leaders."<sup>53</sup> Roosevelt's ominous announcement likewise surprised many in the international community, who had seen several months pass without any overt militaristic posturing (the *Bismarck* notwithstanding). The British press reported that "no particularly alarming news" had been recently disclosed, and that, in fact, "the outlook was slightly more hopeful than it had been." In Berlin, the press reported that Germany had done nothing to prompt Roosevelt's foreboding remarks, even suggesting that the comments were a deliberate effort to "stimulate the armaments market."<sup>54</sup>

Sailing from Key West aboard the *Houston*, Roosevelt joined Fleet Problem XX, which brought the entire fleet into the Atlantic for the first time in five years. The exercise included 134 ships, 600 planes, 3,210 officers and 49,445 sailors.<sup>55</sup> Although Fleet Problem XX was originally intended to coordinate defense of the Panama Canal, Roosevelt widened the scope of the games soon after his arrival. Spreading the fleet across a huge swath of the Atlantic Ocean, Roosevelt sought to simulate the defense of the United States and the Caribbean from a European invasion.<sup>56</sup> The reasons behind Fleet Problem XX were twofold: It enabled the navy to identify weak points in its defense, but it also sent a muscle-flexing message to Germany. "If this Navy—this strong right arm of ours—is obviously strong, the folly of testing it is equally obvious," remarked Charles Edison, Assistant Secretary of the Navy and son of the famous inventor.<sup>57</sup> Alas, the maneuvers did little to dissuade Hitler from his aggressive agenda. Less than a month after Fleet

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53. "Crisis may Hasten Roosevelt Return."

54. "Roosevelt's Fears Mystify Europe," *New York Times*, February 20, 1939, 1.

55. "National Defense: Strong Arm," *Time*, February 20, 1939, 12-13.

56. Felix Blair, Jr. "President Widens Fleet War Games," *New York Times*, February 22, 1939, 1.

57. "National Defense: Strong Arm," *Time*, February 20, 1939, 12-14; See also Nofi, *To Train the Fleet for War*, 239.

Problem XX (and on the Ides of March, no less), Germany took the rest of Czechoslovakia.

As the situation in Europe deteriorated, word spread throughout Key West that the island's navy base might soon reopen. Mickler described the island during this period with dramatic flair, remarking that it was suddenly "possible to hear the rumble of a distant drum."<sup>58</sup> The economic implications were obvious, and observers anxiously predicted that the city might yet "get another whiff of prosperity out of rearmament."<sup>59</sup> Sure enough, when Germany invaded Poland on September 1, the U.S. Navy initiated the first of several major changes to its Key West base, which had been operating on "bare maintenance" status for years.<sup>60</sup> The Secretary of the Navy immediately closed the base to all visitors and ordered private yachts to vacate the submarine basin at once.<sup>61</sup> That same month, Roosevelt directed the navy to establish a Neutrality Patrol that would monitor domestic shipping lanes. By September 20, 1939, forty destroyers and fifteen submarines were patrolling America's east coast on a daily basis.<sup>62</sup> Two weeks later, neutrality became a hemispheric policy when the Conference of Foreign Ministers of American Republics signed the Act of Panama.<sup>63</sup> Because no other nation in the Americas possessed a comparable navy, the burden of enforcement fell to the United States. The policy was tested a few weeks later when a foreign submarine and two vessels were spotted twenty miles off the coast of Key West. The *Reuben James* sped out from the Key West harbor, but the vessels disappeared and confrontation never materialized.<sup>64</sup>

Commander Granville B. Hoey officially reactivated the Key West naval base a few weeks later, on November 1, 1939.<sup>65</sup> Taking a census on that first day, Hoey noted that the material structures were ill-prepared for modern warfare. "It is true that there are buildings here," Hoey wrote, "but most of them, with the exception

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58. Mickler, *Key West in World War II*, 1.

59. "Small-Scale Model of Pan-America," *New York Times*, February 21, 1939, 14.

60. Mickler, *Key West in World War II*, vi.

61. *Ibid.*, 1.

62. William Scarborough, "The Neutrality Patrol: to Keep us out of World War II?" *Naval Aviation News* (March-April 1990), 19-20.

63. Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II, volume 1: the Battle of the Atlantic* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1970), 14.

64. "U Boat, Two Tankers seen off Key West," *New York Times*, October 10, 1939, 2.

65. Mickler, *Key West in World War II*, 1.

of the machine shops, were empty.”<sup>66</sup> Sitting on fifty acres near the western end of the island, the base was badly in need of repair. The restoration process began almost immediately. “These prelude-to-war months were of constantly widening horizons at the Key West Station,” recalled Mickler. “For each new activity commenced, orders for two more seemed to follow immediately.” This growth continued in 1940, when the East Coast Sound School, later known as the Fleet Sonar School, was transferred from Connecticut to Key West. At the school, select sailors were trained in sonar and then dispersed on ships around the world to ply their trade. As activity increased at the naval base, Key West welcomed a seemingly endless stream of vessels into its port (Figure 3). In June 1940, 882 merchant ships passed through Key West, with an estimated average tonnage of 148,000 daily—twice the average through the Panama Canal.<sup>67</sup>

The merchant traffic that passed through Key West was protected

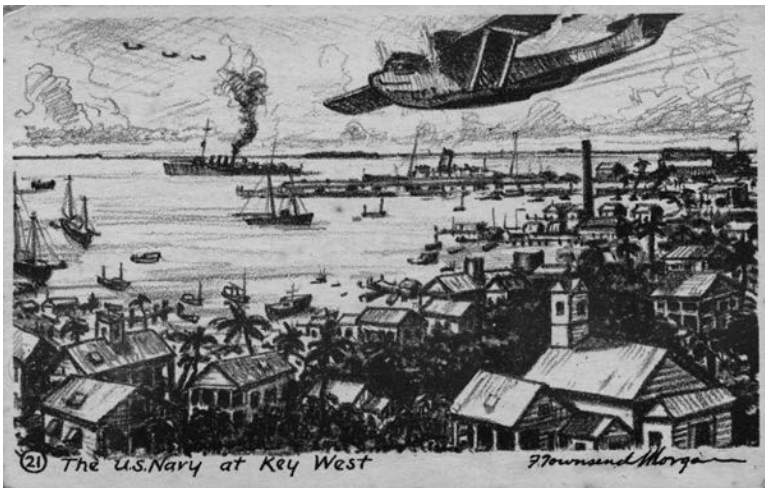


Figure 3. The U.S. Navy at Key West, 1940. This postcard by F. Townsend Morgan captures the island’s busy harbor on the eve of war. Morgan first arrived in Key West as a hired artist for the Works Progress Administration. He remained on the island until 1949. *Image courtesy of the Monroe County Library, Key West, Florida.*

by the rapidly expanding Neutrality Patrol. Consisting of roughly 125 surface vessels in December 1940, the Neutrality Patrol kept constant vigil over domestic shipping lanes, from Canada to the

66. Mickler, 2.

67. *Ibid.*, 4-5.



southern Caribbean. Among its resources were three battleships (the *New York*, the *Texas*, and the *Arkansas*), a large number of aircraft carriers, destroyers, submarines and auxiliaries. Overhead, roughly fifty bombers and a few blimps patrolled the airways over critical oceanic junctures.<sup>68</sup> Key West played an increasingly pivotal role in this effort. In the closing weeks of December 1940, the naval base received three submarines, the first such vessels housed there since the Great War.<sup>69</sup> The implications were not lost on citizens, who celebrated the arrival of the submarines with a parade.<sup>70</sup> The Key West Naval Air Station was established around the same time, and twelve long-range bombers arrived on December 30 1940.<sup>71</sup> By February 1941, more than a thousand personnel were on active duty at the Key West Naval Station and Naval Air Station.<sup>72</sup> In addition, the navy also employed a large number of civilians. Winifred Shine, a local woman who began working at the naval base as a Civil Service employee in 1941, likened the base to a “beehive of activity.” As she later recalled, the harbor was constantly busy with warships, tugboats, vintage four-stack destroyers, submarines, mine sweepers, mine layers, and, on occasion, pods of curious dolphins.<sup>73</sup> By the summer of 1941, the navy had already spent \$7,000,000 on defense projects in Key West.<sup>74</sup>

As sailors, soldiers, and defense workers descended on the island, so too did a record number of tourists. Every carload of people that drove across the Overseas Highway during those early years contributed money to the city’s coffers, as a toll charged one dollar for each automobile and its driver, plus twenty-five cents for each additional passenger.<sup>75</sup> At least 1,500 people travelled on the highway during the Labor Day weekend of 1941, a fifty percent increase over the same

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68. Harold B. Hinton, “Neutrality Patrol Schools Navy,” *New York Times*, December 1, 1940, E5.

69. “Key West to be Submarine Base,” *New York Times*, November 24, 1940, 38.

70. “Navy Bombers at Key West,” *New York Times*, December 30, 1940, 9.

71. Scarborough, “The Neutrality Patrol: to Keep Us Out of World War II?,” 21.

72. Ogle, *Key West: History of an Island of Dreams*, 190.

73. Winifred Shine Fryzel, “Experiences of World War II Taught Valuable Lessons,” *Florida Keys Sea Heritage Journal*, 3, no.2 (1992/1993): 10.

74. Wanda MacDowell, “Defense Booms Key West, No Longer ‘Forgotten City,’” May 23, 1941. Key West Chamber of Commerce Records, 1920-1943, folder 3. Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

75. White and Smiley, *History of Key West*, 73.

weekend a year earlier.<sup>76</sup> Another 20,000 people used the Overseas Highway in November 1941, a forty percent increase over the previous November.<sup>77</sup> This was an utterly new experience in American history, driving to a Caribbean island. Comprising the nation's southernmost frontier, Key West was, quite literally, the end of the road, "the farthest one could drive without a passport."<sup>78</sup>

Whether they travelled via ship, plane, or automobile, visitors arriving in Key West discovered a city unlike any other in the United States. Stephen Singleton, chair of the Key West Chamber of Commerce, estimated that the island's pre-war population was "equally distributed among native whites, Cuban-Americans, and Negroes."<sup>79</sup> Attempts to provide a more accurate account of the island's demographics often ran into difficulties. In 1929, Elmer Holmes Davis, a writer for *Harper's*, divided the population among three different groups: Cubans, Conchs (described as immigrants of European ancestry who had arrived in Key West via the Bahamas), and Americans (with a "negligible minority of Negroes").<sup>80</sup> During the New Deal, the Department of Research and Statistics divided the population between two races (76% white, 24% black) and among three areas of extraction (55% American, 26% Latin, 19% Other). Even so, the department's director acknowledged that census categories failed to capture the island's diversity. "Under 'extraction' the classification is not racial, but cultural and linguistic," Harold Ballou explained. "A number of negroes (*sic*) are thus of 'Latin' extraction, others are 'American' and some classified under 'Other' may either be either whites or negroes (*sic*) from the Bahamas, etc., Chinese, etc." Further complicating matters, Ballou continued, "A number of individuals claiming to be citizens are still technically aliens, never having taken out citizenship papers, but in many such cases, the individual has lived in Key West the greater part of his life."<sup>81</sup>

76. "Bridge Toll Collections Continuing to Mount," *Key West Citizen*, October 3, 1941, 1.

77. "Overseas Highway Toll Collections on Increase," *Key West Citizen*, December 4, 1941, 1.

78. Hal Crowther, *Gather at the River: Notes from the post-Millennial South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 103.

79. Stephen C. Singleton, "Letter to Selden C. Menefee," March 15, 1940. Key West Chamber of Commerce Records, 1920-1943, folder 4. Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

80. Elmer Holmes Davis, "Another Caribbean Conquest," *Harper's Monthly Magazine* (January, 1929), 170.

81. Harold Ballou, "Key West Census Figures, Department of Research and Statistics, August 1, 1934," *Key West Writers Program*, 153. Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

This heterogeneous population generally welcomed the growing number of visitors who infused ever more currency into the city's still convalescent economy. Few industries blossomed like the island's houses of questionable repute. Like many other exotic ports of call, Key West had long taken a lenient stand toward its vibrant red-light district. Though barely seven square miles in area, the island supported no fewer than seven brothels in 1941.<sup>82</sup> Civic leaders were forced to reconsider their lenient position, however, when a young prostitute was murdered in an upstairs room at Alice's, an infamous brothel where all of the girls wore "virginal white" and spoke with charming Southern accents.<sup>83</sup> The young woman was strangled with a pair of silk underwear, which were pulled tight around her neck and held fast with a toothbrush.<sup>84</sup> As the salacious details appeared in newspapers across the nation, police in Key West struggled to identify suspects among the island's transient swarm of sailors and tourists. The case was thought solved a year later when an ex-sailor named Richard Patrick Leroy reportedly confessed to the crime. He was eventually acquitted, however, when it was determined that his confession was part of an ill-advised attempt to gain sympathy from an estranged lover.<sup>85</sup>

As tourists arrived via the highway and sailors trafficked in from the sea, the population of Key West rose for the first time in decades.<sup>86</sup> Not surprisingly, the growing population placed an ever greater strain on Key West's limited supply of water. Unlike the majority of Florida Keys, the island of Key West benefited from two freshwater springs that bubbled up from the Biscayne Aquifer.<sup>87</sup> These wells had proved of significant interest to pirates two hundred years earlier, but they could not keep pace with twentieth-century demand. The city sometimes shipped fresh water in on trains and barges, though the majority of Key West citizens drew their water from rain that collected in cisterns. The city's tourism literature celebrated the fact

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82. Simpleton, "Not Remedial," *Key West Citizen*, January 20, 1942, 2.

83. Dorothy Raymer, *Key West Collection* (Key West, FL: Key West Island Bookstore, 1981), 3.

84. "Man Confesses Slaying at Key West," *St. Petersburg Times*, April 1, 1942, 12.

85. "Acquit Sailor of Florida Killing," *Lewiston Daily Sun*, July 25, 1942, 2.

86. *The Seventh Census of the State of Florida, 1945: taken in accordance with the provisions of chapter 22515 Laws of Florida, Act of Legislature of 1945* (Tallahassee, FL: N. Mayo, Commissioner of Agriculture, 1946), 11.

87. T.R. Beaven and F.W. Meyer, *Record of Wells in the Floridian Aquifer in Dade and Monroe Counties, Florida* (Washington, D.C.: United States Geological Survey, 1978), 1.

in creative fashion. "We drink the best water in the world," one local bragged, "it comes straight from heaven."<sup>88</sup> The naval base collected the seasonal manna in two 312,000-gallon cisterns. A distilling plant provided the navy an additional 35,000 gallons of water per day, but it did little to match demand as the station's pre-war complement of 3,300 souls grew. As Mickler observed, "water was liquid gold."<sup>89</sup> Thus, on March 18, 1941, the navy announced plans to build a 130-mile-long pipeline that would supply Key West with fresh water from the mainland. As construction of the aqueduct began in December 1941, the island's citizens celebrated. "At long last," the *Key West Citizen* declared, "Key West's long struggle for a constant source of fresh water (is) one step nearer success."<sup>90</sup>

Although the United States was still technically neutral in November 1941, the war had already transformed Key West in a number of profound ways. The city's heterogeneous population welcomed thousands of strangers into their midst. Sailors trafficked in from the sea, while tourists and defense workers poured in over the recently completed highway. For the first time in years, the island's industries (red-light or otherwise) were thriving once more. For many residents, the windfall harkened memories of the previous world war, which had generated great wealth on Key West but never any real threat of danger. As they would soon discover, however, nothing is predictable when the world is at war.

### War Comes to the Keys (1942)

Like the rest of their countrymen, the people of Key West were shocked when they learned that Japan had launched a surprise attack on the Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor. The news proved especially unnerving in Key West, which also possessed a frontier naval base. In response to the attacks, the navy imposed mandatory blackouts throughout Key West, and Marines were stationed at critical points along the Overseas Highway. On December 9, 1941, seventy-five army trucks rumbled into town carrying more than 1,500 soldiers, the largest movement of troops in the history of the island.<sup>91</sup> At

88. Maude Haynes Hollowell, *Go to Sea: Key West, Gibraltar of America* (Key West, FL: n. p., 1939), 1. Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

89. Mickler, *Key West in World War II*, 24.

90. "And what of the Road?" *Key West Citizen*, October 1, 1941, 1.

91. "Fifteen Hundred Army Troops arrive in Key West," *Key West Citizen*, December 10, 1941, 1.

a public meeting in the City Hall a day after the attack, Captain Russell Crenshaw, commandant of the naval station, assured a crowd of several hundred nervous citizens that Key West was in no immediate danger of attack.<sup>92</sup> Just to be sure, however, Lieutenant Commander A.F Winslow of the navy instructed them on methods to combat chemical warfare, incendiary bombs, and gas attacks.<sup>93</sup> Meanwhile, the tugboat *Willett*, commanded by Captain Edward Mumford, left Key West to help clear wreckage from the shallows at Pearl Harbor.<sup>94</sup>

Though most citizens enthusiastically supported the war effort, they sometimes bristled under the changes which attended the nation's entrance into war. The first cries of protest arose in January 1942, when the navy asked city leaders to shut down the island's famed red-light district. Despite the island's longstanding leniency toward the world's oldest profession, Captain Crenshaw deemed prostitution a menace to the health, welfare, and efficiency of navy personnel.<sup>95</sup> Though the military advocated a similar course of action in other war-production communities, the situation was especially precarious in Key West. After all, Florida reported a higher rate of venereal disease than any other state in the union, and no locale boasted a higher incidence of disease than Key West's umbilical anchor on the mainland, Miami.<sup>96</sup> These facts convinced the navy that steps had to be taken to avoid a potential epidemic.

Despite this rationale, navy officials acknowledged that "there is practically no community support for a program of repression of prostitution."<sup>97</sup> Sheriff Berlin Sawyer and his deputies agreed to abide by the navy's wishes, but they also went on record against the

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92. "Captain Crenshaw said Key West was in No Immediate Danger of Enemy Attack," *Key West Citizen*, December 10, 1941, 1.

93. "Key West ready to play its part in War Program," *Key West Citizen*, December 8, 1941, 1-2.

94. "Wrecking Tug Leaving for Pearl Harbor," *Key West Citizen*, December 9, 1941, 1.

95. Paul D. Jones, "Field Trip to Key West," February 27, 1942, 1, RG 215—Office of Community War Services, Entry 3, Box 76, File—Region VII, Florida—Key West, National Archives.

96. "Albert Carey Tells Council of City's Ills," *Key West Citizen*, n. d., RG 212 - Committee for Congested Production Areas, Entry 16, Box 2, File—Key West, Florida, National Archives; see also: Capt. R. S. Crenshaw, letter dated April 18, 1942. RG 215—Office of Community War Services, Entry 3, Box 75, File—Region VII, Florida—General, National Archives.

97. Paul D. Jones, "Field Trip to Key West," February 27, 1942, 5, RG 215—Office of Community War Services, Entry 3, Box 76, File—Region VII, Florida—Key West, National Archives.

policy, calling prostitution a “necessary evil in a military center.”<sup>98</sup> Many worried that the navy’s decision would merely decentralize the industry, driving “the seven known brothels into perhaps fifty unknown.” Nor would it do any good to exile prostitutes, one citizen observed, because “others will be here to take their place in a few days, augmenting the present crowd of women that infest all the bars up and down Duval Street.”<sup>99</sup> Citizens like J. R. Deland insisted that an island full of frustrated sailors was capable of anything, and thus defended prostitution in the name of family values. “Take away their bawdy houses and you leave them no place to satisfy their beastial desires except in some dark lane with your innocent daughters,” he warned.<sup>100</sup>

While the people of Key West debated the merits of organized prostitution, the enemy was already en route to their shores. Hitler had ordered U-boats to the American coasts on December 12, just days after the United States formally entered World War II. The operation, given the chilling name *Paukenschlag* (“drumbeat”), was commanded by Karl Doenitz.<sup>101</sup> “Doenitz’s strategy was simple,” Maingot explains; “(sink) the largest number of ships in the shortest span of time.” Doing so would not only preoccupy the Americans, Doenitz reasoned, but would also disrupt the vital lanes through which oil and other materials were shipped.<sup>102</sup>

The first attack in American waters occurred on January 12, 1942, when a German U-boat torpedoed the British passenger steamer *Cyclops* about 300 miles east of Cape Cod. Four days later, the navy confirmed that an American tanker had been torpedoed sixty miles off the coast of Block Island, practically in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty.<sup>103</sup> Scrambling to fortify its southeastern shores, the navy established the Gulf Sea Frontier (GSF) on February 6, 1942.<sup>104</sup> Headquartered in Key West, the GSF was charged with protecting “the Florida Coast and Straits, most of the

98. Jones, “Field Trip to Key West,” 2.

99. Simpleton, “Not Remedial,” *Key West Citizen*, January 20, 1942, 2.

100. J. R. Deland, “Prostitution Problem,” *Key West Citizen*, January 20, 1942, 2.

101. Michael Gannon, *Operation Drumbeat: the Dramatic True Story of Germany’s First U-Boat Attacks Along the American Coast in World War II* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2009), 71.

102. Anthony Maingot, *The United States and the Caribbean: Challenges of an Asymmetrical Relationship* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), 57.

103. Morison, *History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II, vol. 1: the Battle of the Atlantic*, 126.

104. Russell Crenshaw, “Introduction,” *Gulf Sea Frontier War Diary*, March 31, 1942, 2.

Bahamas, the entire Gulf of Mexico, the Yucatan Channel and most of Cuba.”<sup>105</sup> Despite preparations, the war arrived in Florida waters a month later when Nazi submarines sank the *Pan Massachusetts* off the coast of Cape Canaveral on February 19, 1942.<sup>106</sup> Over the next three days, three more ships were torpedoed off the coast of Palm Beach.<sup>107</sup>

The United States was woefully ill-prepared for the U-boat onslaught. Time and again, American ships were torpedoed in the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean Sea, and the Atlantic Ocean. Because Key West touched all three of these theaters, its citizens were confronted with war more frequently than most Americans. These reality checks often took the form of weakened sailors staggering ashore with harrowing tales. The *Leif*, a merchant vessel controlled by Nordstraship and chartered to the Bull Line Steamship Company of New York, was among the many ships sunk during the first week of May. Ten survivors were picked up after 52 hours in a lifeboat and brought to Key West. Most of their fellow crew members remained missing, including the ship's lone American: Martin Stuart of Brooklyn. “There was only one torpedo, but one was enough,” Holm Brynildser, master of the vessel, recounted upon his arrival in Key West. It had all happened so fast, he said, that none of the crew had seen the submarine.<sup>108</sup>

Just days after the sinking of the *Leif*, more survivors were brought to Key West when two merchant ships were torpedoed off the Florida coast within sight of one another. Thirty-eight sailors had been aboard one of the ships, though only ten survived. The other ship fared even worse. Among its crew of thirty-two sailors, only four survived. One of them, Preston Carpenter of Texas, informed navy personnel in Key West that he had seen the submarine when it surfaced. It was “freshly painted, without a spot of rust on her,” he recalled. “She was painted gray and a large black swastika was painted on the conning tower.” Carpenter seethed with anger when he recounted how the surfaced submarine gunned down his fellow sailors. “I could see the machine gun as it moved from one direction to another,” he recalled, “aiming bullets directly at the

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105. Mickler, *Key West in World War II*, 135.

106. *Ibid.*, 128; See also Tom Hambricht, “German U-Boats Assault Florida Keys,” *Florida Keys Sea Heritage Journal*, 2, no. 4 (1992), 1.

107. Crenshaw, “Introduction,” *Gulf Sea Frontier War Diary*, March 31, 1942, 4.

108. “Four More Ships Lost,” *New York Times*, May 7, 1942, 1.



men in the forecandle."<sup>109</sup> He vowed to return to the sea so that he might avenge his fallen mates.

As the month progressed, more and more survivors came ashore at Key West. On May 18, German soldiers taunted the victims of a shipwreck as they bobbed in the water. A submarine crewman hoisted the Nazi flag and gave the German salute as American seamen swam for their lives. "They wanted to make darned sure we knew their identity," Leonard Shearer recalled from his hospital bed in Key West.<sup>110</sup> Other survivors shared similar stories. That same week, for example, an American merchant ship managed to stay afloat when a torpedo glanced off its side. The submarine then assailed the ship with gunfire. Only twenty-one of the original forty-seven passengers survived. Among them was a 16-month-old infant, nicknamed "Shipwreck Kelly" by his parents. Once on dry land in Key West, the child's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Cupples of Mount Cory, Ohio, reported that the commander of the submarine had taunted them. "You can thank Mr. Roosevelt for this," he told them in broken English.<sup>111</sup> When another ship was sunk in the area five days later, the U-boat commander again addressed survivors bobbing in the water. "He said it was a pity what he had done," survivors recalled, "but that we had no one to blame but Mr. Roosevelt."<sup>112</sup>

Because these attacks often claimed more lives than they spared, individuals landing in Key West told amazing stories of survival. Two crewmen recounted how they survived an attack that claimed most of their fellow shipmates by hiding in the water tank of their burning ship until the flames subsided. They were later rescued from the smoldering vessel just minutes before it sank.<sup>113</sup> Perhaps the most amazing survival story, however, belonged to twenty-three-year-old Harley Archie Olson. After his ship was torpedoed on April 19, he jumped into the water and took refuge in a nearby life raft. Separated from his crewmates, Olson collected rations from two nearby rafts. A fateful decision, it turned out, for he spent the next twenty-nine days

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109. "Three ships torpedoed, 56 men missing," *New York Times*, May 9, 1942, 6.

110. "Swastika waved at Ship Survivors," *New York Times*, May 25, 1942, 6.

111. "63 Die on 3 U. S. Ships Torpedoed in Gulf," *New York Times*, May 24, 1942, 1.  
See also Homer H. Hickam, *Torpedo Junction: U-Boat War off America's East Coast, 1942* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute), 219.

112. "Submarine Denies Water to Victims," *New York Times*, May 29, 1942, 5.

113. "33 Men Drown when Subs Sink Two Ships in Gulf," *St. Petersburg Times*, May 20, 1942, 7.

alone, adrift at sea. Even after he was discovered and taken to Key West, Olson remained in federal custody. The British skipper who saved him had evidently taken Olson for a spy, not believing that any man could survive a month at sea in such good condition. When it became clear that Olson was, in fact, American, he was released and hailed as a hero. Later that year, he was profiled in *None More Courageous*, a wonderful piece of American propaganda celebrating heroism in the young war.<sup>114</sup>

Despite these tales of bravery, Germany was clearly winning the Battle of the Atlantic. Between January and May, 1942, there were never more than forty U-boats operating in the western half of the Atlantic.<sup>115</sup> Even so, U-boats sank an astounding 568 Allied ships during that period. The month of May proved an especially brutal month in the GSF, where losses totaled 49 ships and over 200,000 gross tons. This was the worst month that any naval frontier would endure throughout the entire war.<sup>116</sup> Things improved but slightly in June, when U-boats sank an additional 25 ships in Florida waters. Two were sunk within six miles of Key West.<sup>117</sup> The German fleet was so successful that they referred to this period as the “Second Happy Time.” In the summer of 1942, Doenitz informed Hitler that “our submarines are operating close inshore along the coast of the United States of America, so that bathers and sometimes entire coastal cities are witness to that drama of war, whose visual climaxes are constituted by the red glorioles of blazing tankers.”<sup>118</sup> Doenitz had every reason to gloat. His submarines sank more than a hundred ships in the Gulf Sea Frontier, twenty-five of them between Key West and Daytona.<sup>119</sup> These losses not only hurt morale but were militarily debilitating. General George C. Marshall conceded that “the losses by submarines off our Atlantic seaboard and in the Caribbean now threaten our entire war effort.”<sup>120</sup> Winston Churchill was similarly unnerved. “The only thing that ever really frightened me during the

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114. Stewart Holbrook, *None More Courageous: American War Heroes of Today* (New York: Stratford Press, 1942). See also “An Odd Sea Tale,” *New York Times*, May 29, 1942, 5.

115. Morison, *History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II, vol. 1: the Battle of the Atlantic*, 128.

116. *Ibid.*, 137.

117. Mickler, *Key West in World War II*, 128-9.

118. Morison, *History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II, vol. 1: the Battle of the Atlantic*, 157.

119. Mickler, *Key West in World War II*, 129; Gary Mormino, “Midas Returns: Miami goes to War,” 8.

war was the U-boat peril," he later opined. "I was even more anxious about this battle than I had been about the glorious air fight called the Battle of Britain."<sup>121</sup>

Fortunately, the same summer that arrived with such terrifying bluster ended on a much more stable note. Following the peak of 49 attacks in May, the number decreased sharply each of the following months.<sup>122</sup> Several factors contributed to the United States' improving fortunes on the maritime front. For example, the Allied counter-offensive gained invaluable assistance when the Enigma machine broke the U-boats' code.<sup>123</sup> The situation also improved when military officials began demanding more diligent enforcement of coastal blackouts. "One of the most reprehensible failures on our part was the neglect of local communities to dim their waterfront lights... until three months after the submarine offensive started," Morison later lamented.<sup>124</sup> Despite its naval connections, Key West was among the guilty cities. One naval officer reported that the lights of Key West were plainly visible over 30 miles from harbor.<sup>125</sup>

To its credit, however, Key West instituted several anti-submarine measures that protected waters both locally and abroad. For example, the navy planted a total of 3,460 Mark VI mines in the waters north and west of Key West in April. Though U-boat attacks continued in the months thereafter, the minefield's existence narrowed the area on which attention was focused.<sup>126</sup> On a much broader front, the Key West Sound School trained thousands of sailors to detect submarines using sonar equipment. Prior to the war, the school had produced 130 sound operators per month. During the first three weeks of 1942, more than 900 enlisted men graduated from the school's basic sound training. The sound school also helped U.S. Allies, training more than a thousand men from seven different navies during the war.<sup>127</sup> Meanwhile, the man most closely associated with Key West initiated his own anti-submarine campaign that was symbolically brazen, if not terribly effective. Operating from a ranch

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120. Quoted in Maingot, *The United States and the Caribbean*, 58.

121. Richard Langworth, *Churchill by Himself: the Definitive Collection of Quotations* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008), 305.

122. Mickler, *Key West in World War II*, 129.

123. Maingot, *The United States and the Caribbean*, 61.

124. Morison, *History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II, vol. 1: the Battle of the Atlantic*, 129.

125. "State Ports Criticized for Poor Dimouts," *St Petersburg Times*, July 9, 1942, 8.

126. Mickler, *Key West in World War II*, 125.

127. Morison, *The Battle of the Atlantic*, 215.

just outside Havana, Ernest Hemingway spent large parts of 1942 and 1943 patrolling the straits between Cuba and the Florida Keys on his fishing boat, *Pilar*, armed with little more than a few machine guns, a handful of grenades, and an inordinate amount of chutzpah.<sup>128</sup>

Perhaps no measure contributed more to the navy's campaign against U-boats than the decision to organize all merchant ships into convoys and provide them with security escorts. This new policy affected Key West in several ways. In June 1942, the navy transferred command of the GSF from Key West to Miami. Though the move was made for logistical reasons (telephone lines between the island and the mainland were "unreliable" and unnecessarily exposed), it did little to undermine the island's significance in the war. Quickly emerging as an important convoy assembly point, the waters around Key West were soon busier than ever.<sup>129</sup> Meanwhile, bombers and blimps patrolled the skies with greater efficiency. Proving critical to the war effort, each blimp patrolled an area of 2,000 square miles every twelve hours, spotting U-boats at depths of over 70 feet.<sup>130</sup>

As each of these measures took effect, conditions in the waters surrounding Key West improved dramatically. After losing more than a hundred ships during the spring and early summer, the GSF reported just one sinking in September and none during the rest of the year. There were only five successful U-boat attacks in all of 1943, though one of them remains etched in the annals of naval history.<sup>131</sup> On the night of July 18, 1943, a navy blimp (*K-74*) engaged in battle with a German submarine (*U-134*) forty miles southwest of Key West, the first and only such battle in recorded history.<sup>132</sup> Although the *K-74* delivered several depth charges, gunners on the U-boat fired back on the airship and knocked out its starboard engine. Under heavy fire, the blimp crashed into the water. The battle claimed the life of one crewman, and the others were rescued after treading water (and fighting sharks) for almost twenty hours.<sup>133</sup>

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128. Terry Mort, *The Hemingway Patrols: Ernest Hemingway and his Hunt for U-boats* (New York: Scribner, 2009), passim.

129. Morison, *History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II, vol. 1: the Battle of the Atlantic*, 135.

130. *Ibid.*, 142.

131. Mickler, *Key West in World War II*, 129.

132. Frederick Simpich, "From Indian Canoes to Submarines at Key West," *National Geographic* (January, 1950), 50.

133. There is some disagreement among historians about whether or not the *K-74* actually dropped its depth charges, although Atwood produces convincing evidence that it did so successfully. See Anthony Atwood, "An Incident at Sea: the Historic Combat between U. S. Navy Blimp K-74 and U-Boat 134," Master's

### A Community Transformed (1943-1945)

As the U-boat menace waned and then disappeared, Key West had more than one reason to celebrate. On September 22, 1942, the first drops of water dribbled in through the new navy-built aqueduct and into the city. By the end of the month, 1.5 million gallons of water gushed through the pipe every day, and that number would soon double.<sup>134</sup> The city's economy was running on all cylinders for the first time in decades. "Key West is now a boom town," Pauline Hemingway wrote to a friend, "with wages in the clouds and housing accommodations in the gutter."<sup>135</sup> Though fewer than 13,000 people had lived in Key West in 1940, the island's population skyrocketed as the naval base transformed into a vital hub for oceangoing convoys and ship repairs.<sup>136</sup> By early 1943, ration board officers estimated that the population had climbed to over 31,000.<sup>137</sup> This number did not include army and navy personnel, who usually numbered around 10,000. All told, when Key West was at its busiest, more than 45,000 people crammed onto the tiny island.<sup>138</sup>

Calling Key West "hopelessly overcrowded," the Office of Community War Services (OCWS) identified housing as the most urgent problem confronting the island community. Every room on the island was accounted for, and when one became available, defense laborers took precedent. Even so, many skilled workers arrived on the island, found no place to stay, and caught the next bus out of town.<sup>139</sup> Throughout the war, the Manpower Commission counted thousands of jobs in Key West for which there

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Thesis, Florida International University, 2003; Tom Hambright, "German U-Boats Assault Florida Keys," *Florida Keys Sea Heritage Journal*, 2, no. 4 (1992): 10-11; Gaylord T. M. Kelshall, *The U-Boat War in the Caribbean* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1994), 342; Jim Wiggins, *Florida and World War II: a Personal Recollection* (Westminster, MD: Heritage Books, 2008), 71.

134. Carston R. Heinlein, "Key West Search for Water, Part III," *Florida Keys Sea Heritage Journal*, 16, no. 3 (2006): 1-16.

135. Miller, *Letters from the Lost Generation*, 283.

136. *The Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940*, Part I, US Bureau of the Census (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1942), 212.

137. "Report on Key West, Florida War Area," October 1, 1943, 1, RG—215, Office of Community War Services, Entry 3, Box 81, Folder K-L, National Archives.

138. Mickler, *Key West in World War II*, ii.

139. "Housing Problem still Unsolved," *Key West Citizen*, March 13, 1944, RG 212—Committee for Congested Production Areas, Entry 16, Box 2, File—Key West, Florida, National Archives.

was pressing demand but no more supply.<sup>140</sup> Hoping to ameliorate the dreadful housing situation, city officials begged tourists to take their business elsewhere. Though tourists had helped rescue the island from poverty in the mid-1930s, they now clogged a vital war production area. The Key West Chamber of Commerce politely explained that there was simply no room for anyone else, but people continued to pour into the city. Those who arrived in Key West without accommodations had to improvise, often sleeping in cars, on the beach, or in upright chairs in hotel lobbies.<sup>141</sup>

The population boom ensured economic growth, but citizens soon discovered that prosperity came at a price. There were “three and four house robberies every night,” Pauline Hemingway wrote, “with the police force consisting of three very baffled men leaping around to one place after another where the robber has just operated and disappeared.”<sup>142</sup> An editorial in the *Key West Citizen* implored both the police and the citizenry to clean up the town. “It is a new experience for Key Westers to have their wallets snatched from their pockets,” the editorial observed, but “thousands of strangers are in our midst.” Blaming “the rascals who have drifted in here from all over the country,” the paper demanded that law enforcement “curb the crime wave that has been gathering volume in our community.”<sup>143</sup>

The soaring population also presented a number of challenges to Key West’s outdated infrastructure. The island’s humble garbage collection services remained badly overtaxed throughout most of the war, and wet trash sometimes simmered in the tropical sun for weeks without collection. As one official with the OCWS noted, “the downtown streets were littered with paper and trash. This alone, with standing water on the edge of the streets, gave the central part of town a most offensive odor.”<sup>144</sup> Others remarked that living conditions “bordered on the general level of a slum.”<sup>145</sup>

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140. “Labor Market Development Report, Key West Area,” April 30, 1943, Florida Industrial Commission, War Manpower Commission Reports, Box 2, File 1, State Archives of Florida.

141. Stu Morrison, “Key West’s ‘Stay Away’ Plea Futile,” *Miami Herald*, August 13, 1944, 8B, RG 212—Committee for Congested Production Areas, Entry 16, Box 2, File—Key West, Florida, National Archives.

142. Miller, *Letters from the Lost Generation*, 283.

143. “Clean up the Town,” *Key West Citizen*, January 1, 1943, 2.

144. “Report on Key West, Florida War Area,” October 1, 1943, 14, RG—215, Office of Community War Services, Entry 3, Box 81, Folder K-L, National Archives.

Medical services failed to keep pace with the island's rapid growth. Although the naval hospital had opened in November 1942 (just in time to accept soldiers from Guadalcanal), there remained no hospital for civilians.<sup>146</sup> Making matters worse, there was but a handful of doctors on the island, and most of them were retired, infirm, or otherwise incapacitated. Local authorities informed the federal officials that the medical services available in Key West were "about equal to those which would be provided by two well-qualified physicians working on a full-time basis," and estimated that there was only one physician for every 18,000 people.<sup>147</sup> Thus, in April 1943, the Federal Works Agency (FWA) approved construction of a municipal hospital and a health clinic to serve the citizens of Key West.<sup>148</sup>

Although sailors and civilians stood united in the war effort, tensions between them remained (Figure 4).<sup>149</sup> Bernard "Bunny" Pemstein, a young navy recruit from Massachusetts stationed at the naval hospital, described his impression of the island in a letter to his parents: "The liberty town STINKS," he wrote in October 1943. "One lousy street. Nothing to do but drink."<sup>150</sup> According to Robert Roberge, who spent several weeks on the island while training at the Sound School, there was very little interaction between the military and civilians. "There just wasn't a normal civilian population there in those days," he recalled years later. "There was some, but we never came in contact with them."<sup>151</sup> According to Carlton Smith, however, the separation was deliberate. "In the opinion of us soldier boys," he revealed, the

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145. Walter W. Argow, "Field Report—Key West, Florida," August 17, 1943, 1, RG 215—Office of Community War Services, Entry 3, Box 76, File—Region VII, Florida—KeyWest, National Archives.

146. Carston R. Heinlein, "Key West's Naval Hospital," *Florida Keys Sea Heritage Journal*, 3, no. 1 (1992): 8-12.

147. "Report on Key West, Florida War Area," October 1, 1943, 15-17, RG—215, Office of Community War Services, Entry 3, Box 81, Folder K-L, National Archives.

148. "Hospital OK'd for Key West," *Key West Citizen*, April 3, 1943, Florida State Board of Health, Newspaper Clippings, Folder—1943, part II, State Archives of Florida.

149. "Report on Key West, Florida War Area," October 1, 1943, 11, RG—215, Office of Community War Services, Entry 3, Box 81, Folder K-L, National Archives.

150. Bernard L. Pemstein, letter to parents, October 22, 1943. B.L. Pemstein Papers, Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida.

151. Walter L. Roberge, Jr., interview transcript, April 10, 2000, Reichart Program for Oral History, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL.





Figure 4. Navy Day Parade, October 21, 1943. This photograph of the Navy Day Parade was taken on October 21, 1943, at the corner of Duval Street and Fleming Avenue. American flags and Cuban flags hang in the background. *Image courtesy of the Monroe County Library, Key West, Florida.*

locals “weren’t to be trusted.”<sup>152</sup> William Hornung, who also was stationed at Key West, agreed. In his opinion, “it was another one of those Navy towns and the local natives did not like the sailors.”<sup>153</sup> That antagonism sometimes manifested itself in dangerous ways.

152. Carlton M. Smith, interview transcript, October 7, 1999, Reichart Program for Oral History, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL.

153. William G. Hornung, Manuscript, Tom Brokaw Collection, World War II Institute, Florida State University.

D. W. Bolstad, seaman second class, discovered as much when he was beaten, choked, and robbed while walking back to the base late one night after the bars had closed.<sup>154</sup>

Despite this mutual distrust, liaisons between sailors and civilians persisted. Although the island's red-light district had been closed since the beginning of the war, the OCWS reported that prostitutes continued to shuttle in from the mainland. "I am advised that these women generally charge for their services and usually before they can be arrested leave town," OCWS field representative Theodore Eslick informed his boss, Elliot Ness.<sup>155</sup> Others were more concerned about the behavior of non-professional "victory girls," who they felt undermined the war effort in Key West. "The high-pitched tension of war-time living and misguided ideas of patriotism have developed in our communities a vicious abandonment to loose living among local teenage girls," explained Dr. Henry Hanson, State Health Officer.<sup>156</sup> Others reported similar behavior. "Key West is running over with women who have come here from various parts of the country for the sole purpose of meeting sailors, getting them drunk and marrying them," complained Judge Raymond H. Lord. He was tired of these drunken dalliances ending at his doorstep, where inebriated couples demanded to be wed. "In the future," he assured the city, "I'm going to call the police and let them take the women to jail."<sup>157</sup>

Although Key West remained in a state of sustained "saturation" throughout most of the war, conditions were otherwise improving.<sup>158</sup> In June 1944, the FWA agreed to fund the city's

154. "Seamen Choked, Slugged, Robbed," *Key West Citizen*, February 8, 1943.

155. Theodore P. Eslick, "Field Report—Key West, Florida," January 21, 1944, RG 215—Office of Community War Services, Entry 3, Box 76, File—Region VII, Florida—Key West, National Archives.

156. "Doctors Blame 'Victory Girls' for Diseases," *Pensacola News*, September 26, 1943, Florida State Board of Health, Newspaper Clippings, Folder—1943, part II, State Archives of Florida.

157. "Marriage Racket is Criticized by Monroe Judge," *St Petersburg Times*, January 5, 1945, 9.

158. "Key West Evidently has Great Charm; Visitors Arrive Despite Limited Accommodations in City," *Key West Citizen*, 1, RG 212—Committee for Congested Production Areas, Entry 16, Box 2, File—Key West, Florida, National Archives.

garbage collection for six months, with the understanding that the municipal government would again assume control thereafter.<sup>159</sup> Meanwhile, the Federal Housing Authority rapidly constructed several hundred new housing units on the eastern edge of the island.<sup>160</sup> By late July, the U-boat threat was sufficiently remote that the navy collected the mines it had placed around Key West just a few years earlier. While most mines were swept or destroyed by conventional means, several dozen were detonated by machine-gun fire from floating blimps.<sup>161</sup> Meanwhile, civic leaders who sensed that an Allied victory was close at hand began to plan accordingly. The same individuals who had turned tourists away for years now prepared to lure them back. “We have cooperated in the war effort with a campaign urging visitors to stay away” the Key West Chamber of Commerce announced, but “the end of the war will make ample facilities available for visitors.”<sup>162</sup> Entrepreneurs began to openly explore the possibility of converting decommissioned naval vessels into automobile ferries with service to Havana.<sup>163</sup> Indeed, these were heady times on the streets of Key West. “Since war started you can almost hear this Gulf hum!” one resident exclaimed. “More people scrambling, more money spent than even in the big Spindletop oil boom.”<sup>164</sup>

At long last, the United States and its allies secured victory in August 1945. The war finally over, residents of Key West were finally afforded an opportunity to reflect on their collective experience. The island’s financial windfall mirrored a nationwide pattern. Between 1940 and 1945, federal expenditures soared from \$9 billion to \$98 billion, the nation’s per capita income doubled, from \$1,231 to \$2,390, and the number of federal employees quadrupled.<sup>165</sup> Few places epitomized these dramatic transformations like Key

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159. “Garbage Fund at Key West gets Approved,” *Miami Herald*, June 4, 1944, RG 212—Committee for Congested Production Areas, Entry 16, Box 2, File—Key West, Florida, National Archives.

160. Mickler, *Key West in World War II*, 120-121.

161. *Ibid.*, 127.

162. “Time has Come for Key West to Lure Tourists to City,” *Key West Citizen*, September 9, 1944, RG 212—Committee for Congested Production Areas, Entry 16, Box 2, File Key West, Florida, National Archives.

163. “Car Ferry Planned for US, West Indies,” *New York Times*, October 1, 1944, 44.

164. Frederick Simpich, “How We Use the Gulf,” *National Geographic* (January 1944), 1.

165. Mormino, “World War II,” 326; Ambrose, *Americans at War*, 141; Mormino, “Midas Returns: Miami Goes to War,” 21.

West. During the war, the Key West naval base spent more than \$32 million on construction and maintenance, roughly \$12 million in military payrolls, and another \$30 million in civilian paychecks.<sup>166</sup> Meanwhile, the navy increased its holdings in Key West by a factor of sixty. Covering just 50 acres when it reopened in 1939, the Key West Naval Operating Base covered more than 3,200 acres by the end of the war.<sup>167</sup> The navy added most of that acreage when it assumed control of the airfield on Boca Chica, but much of the new land was, well, *new land*. After all, Fleming Key was scarcely more than a sandbar before the navy constructed the island from dredging in 1942.<sup>168</sup> Despite these transformations, however, other changes were more profound. In addition to the 882 men killed or wounded in the GSF during the war, the Key West community had also lost many of its best and brightest.<sup>169</sup> Thirty army soldiers who called Key West home were killed during the war, and more than a dozen Key Westers were killed while serving in the navy.<sup>170</sup>

While a world without war promised a brighter future for many, it also suggested a host of unknowns. The people of Key West had endured transitions to peace before, and not always successfully. But those were worries for another day. The island had earned the right to celebrate in the fall of 1945. Surveying the vibrant island less than a month after the war ended, Mickler proudly touted the city's accomplishments. "In World War II," he wrote, "Key West played to the hilt the role its first Naval Station Commander had cast for it more than a century ago—the Gibraltar of the Gulf."<sup>171</sup>

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166. Ogle, *Key West: History of an Island of Dreams*, 199.

167. Mickler, *Key West in World War II*, i.

168. *Ibid.*, 11. Although Fleming Key comprised little more than 25 acres prior to the war, the navy added more than 200 additional acres by the end of 1943.

169. "U-Boats Attacked 111 Ships and Sank 92 along Gulf-Sea Frontier During the War," *New York Times*, June 4, 1945, 9.

170. *Florida Fatal Casualties (all services) in World War I, World War II* (St. Augustine, FL: State Arsenal, 1980-1989).

171. Mickler, *Key West in World War II*, ii.