

BOMBERS OVER BROWARD

NORTH PERRY AIRPORT DURING WORLD WAR II

by Gerry Witoshynsky

In 1939, Broward County was still recovering from the long depression brought on by the collapse of the early 1920s' land boom, the 1926 and 1928 hurricanes, and the 1929 stock market crash. The European war which broke out in September seemed far away, but it reached Broward's shores in December, when the German ship *Arauca*, pursued by the British cruiser *Orion*, attempted to escape by entering Port Everglades, where it was impounded for over a year. The war came even closer to the Broward County coast in the months immediately following Pearl Harbor, when German U-boats torpedoed Allied merchant ships off Florida's Atlantic seaboard and in the Gulf of Mexico.¹ Florida would soon become deeply involved in the activities of war preparations.

The state's good year-round flying weather, flat terrain, and surrounding waters made it a prime site for air and sea bases. Housing, schools, and amenities could also be provided for service personnel and their families.² Indeed, Florida's advantages had been recognized even before World War I, when the Pensacola Naval Air Station was established in 1914.³ In Dade County, the small Opa-locka airfield developed by aviation pioneer Glenn Curtiss and given by him to the U.S. Navy in 1931 for a reserve training base, became part of the Miami Naval Air Station during World War II.⁴

The pace of military preparedness had quickened noticeably even before the United States entered the war. In 1939, Embry-Riddle Company in Miami, a flight training school, began a program for University of Miami men students, and later, women students were also enrolled.⁵ These students and many other women aviators would perform distinguished service during the war as instructors and ferry pilots for all types of planes transferred everywhere in the United States.⁶

The December 7, 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor brought war planning to emergency status. Operating municipal airfields were quickly

commandeered for training, while new fields sprang up almost overnight in cow pasture and palmetto patch. The Fort Lauderdale Naval Air Station, for example, was operational at the city's Merle Fogg Field within four months of its inception, and opened in October, 1942. Two auxiliary sites were also built, one at Pompano and the other along West Prospect Road.⁷ Port Everglades became the base of a navy boat facility, to assist the Fort Lauderdale NAS with air and sea rescue services, and to tow targets for bombing practice. The huge Miami Naval Air Station was comprised of the main station at Opa-locka, plus Municipal, Master,

One of a number of south Florida aviation facilities which can trace its origins to World War II, North Perry Airport was established on southern Broward County's pastureland as an auxiliary training field for the huge Miami Naval Air Station. As such, it played an important role in training navy fliers for the air war in the Pacific. In recognition of the historical significance of this site, the original operations building has been preserved and renovated.

Gerry Witoshynsky is a founder and current president of the Pembroke Pines Historical Society and a former Broward County Historical Commissioner. "Bombers Over Broward" is the result of her in-depth research on the history of North Perry Airport and was first delivered as one of the Historical Commission's monthly history programs. The photographs accompanying this article are courtesy of the Pembroke Pines Historical Society. Mrs. Witoshynsky and the Pembroke Pines Historical Society are interested in locating any additional information pertaining to North Perry's World War II history. Anyone having photographs, recollections, documents, or information on the whereabouts of veterans who were at North Perry during the war is urged to contact the Broward County Historical Commission.



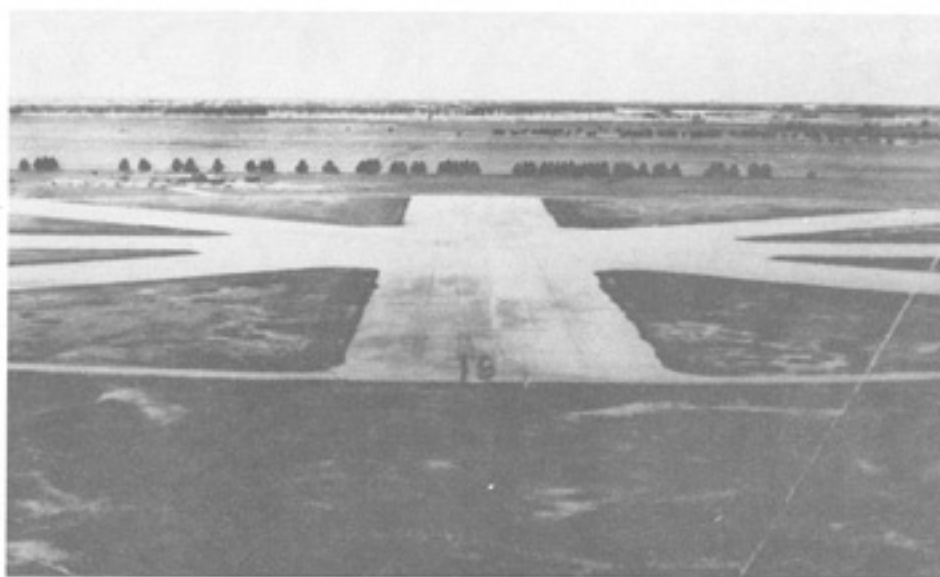
Henry D. Perry, c.1960.

North Perry, South Perry, Forman, and Davie fields.⁸ Statewide, there were approximately one hundred airfield installations.⁹

The many dairy farm pastures along the fringes of the Everglades in southeast Florida were ideal for military airfields. The land was level, mostly cleared, and sparsely populated.¹⁰ The farmers would either rent or sell acreage that could quickly be developed into auxiliary training sites. Some areas of the fields were still used as pastures, so there was no loss of the dairy products needed for the huge surge in population created by the influx of servicemen.¹¹

South Broward pioneer Henry D. Perry had started his dairy west of Hallandale, north and south of Pembroke Road, in 1923. He acquired at least 1,200 acres, and at one time grazed 1,500 cows.¹² The navy rented from him what would become South Perry Field, paying \$400.00 a year for the 400-acre parcel. The site was opened October 28, 1940, and consisted of a grass emergency landing strip with no buildings. Later, North Perry Field was purchased from Perry through condemnation proceedings. The price paid was \$25,276.00 for 640 acres — one square mile.¹³ According to navy archives, the field was commissioned by July, 1943, with the U-shaped Operations Building serving as a bunk room, cafeteria, and a minor radio repair shop. A three-story section served as the control tower. The personnel assigned to the field were support for the trainees flying in from the main base at Miami.¹⁴

North Perry had an unusual wagon-



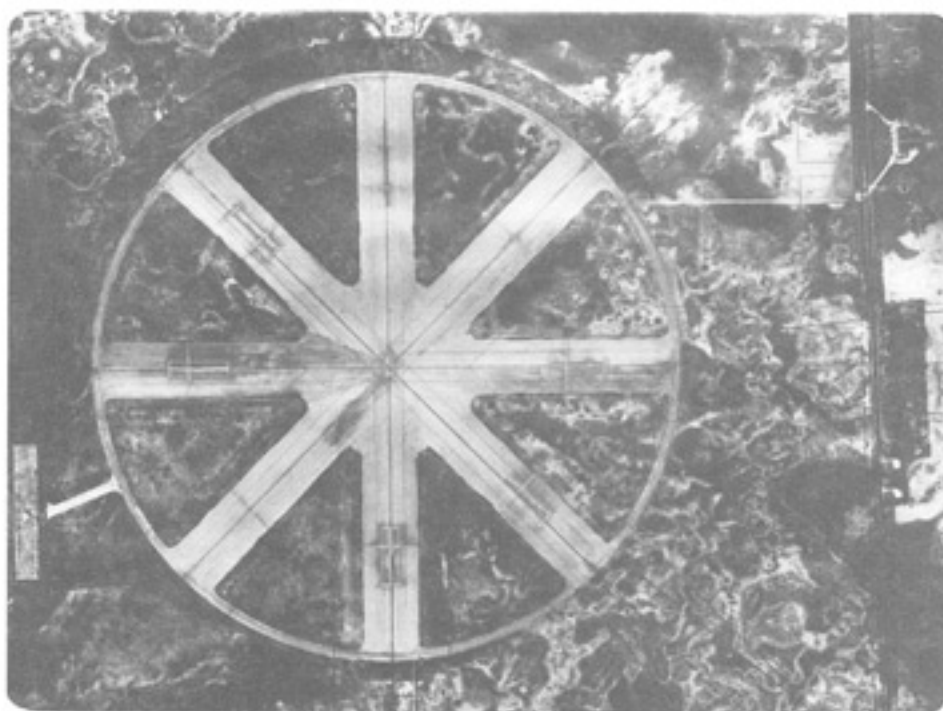
View of the North Perry runway as it appeared during the war, as seen from an incoming plane.

wheel configuration of runways, as did Forman Field in Davie. The runways were marked with aircraft carrier dimensions so the pilots could learn how to land on an 800-to-900-foot long carrier deck.¹⁵ On an into-the-wind approach, the planes would land with flaps down, nose up, tail wheel dragging, and at stall speed.¹⁶

World War II photographs taken at North Perry Field show Grumman Wildcats and AT-11 Kansans, as well as the wagon-wheel runways. Avenger torpedo bombers most likely used the

field as well, and the SNJ trainer, called the AT-6 Texan by the other services, flew in and out.¹⁷

The Wildcats and later Hellcats and the Avenger planes were all designed by the Grumman Corporation and built by that company and by a division of General Motors. They were the major aircraft carrier fighter bombers used by the navy until late in the war. The Avengers had engines of between 1,700 and 1,900 horsepower and weighed 18,250 pounds loaded. Wingspan was fifty-four feet, and its fusel-



Aerial view of the North Perry runways, showing "wagonwheel" configuration.



Grumman F4F Wildcat carrier fighters at North Perry during World War II.



North Perry operations building, c.1950s, with cattle pasture behind row of trees in background.

age length was forty feet. The Avenger could carry a bomb load of 2,000 pounds, and was equipped with .30 and .50 caliber machine guns. Top airspeed was 275 miles per hour. Armor plating around the cockpit saved many a pilot, crew, and plane from destruction. The faster and more maneuverable Japanese Zeroes could not withstand the American aircraft's heavy gunfire. What the American planes lacked in performance early in the war was made up by the training of the pilot and the endurance of the planes, and many a pilot's skills were honed in the skies over Broward County.

The F4F Wildcat was one of the most important naval fighters in the early war years. It represented one of the first steps up from bi-planes to mon-

oplanes. It had a 1,200 horsepower engine and folding wings, as did the Avenger, and its landing gear retracted into the fuselage. Wingspan was thirty-eight feet, length was twenty-eight feet, nine inches, and when loaded it weighed 7,952 pounds. The Wildcat's armament consisted of 200 pounds of bombs or torpedoes and six machine guns. Airspeed was 330 MPH. The later F6F Hellcat was an improvement on the Wildcat, and 12,000 were produced in a three-year period.¹⁸

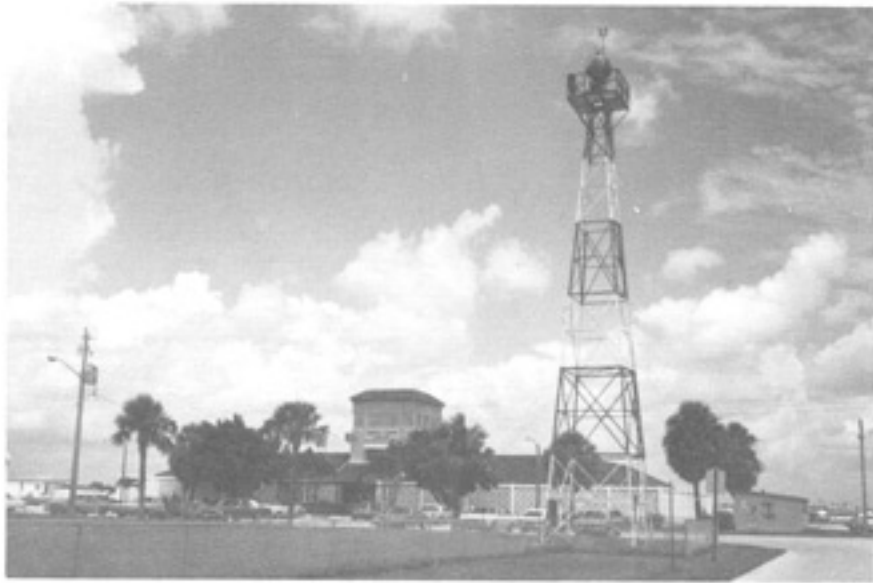
Fort Lauderdale Naval Air Station was a major base for the TBM Avengers.¹⁹ Future President George Bush was stationed at the base for advanced training in torpedo bombing, and received his wings before his nine-

teenth birthday.²⁰

Ensign George Gay, the famous "sole survivor" of Torpedo Squadron Eight that was wiped out at the June 4, 1942 Battle of Midway, trained at Opa-locka. After he recovered from his thirty-six hour ordeal in the water during the battle, he toured the U.S. as a hero, making speeches to sell war bonds, and visiting bases to cheer on fledgling aviators. He eventually became an instructor at Opa-locka. Ensign Gay recalled a particularly memorable experience while serving in that capacity. The "outlying field" he mentions was probably either North Perry or Forman Field:

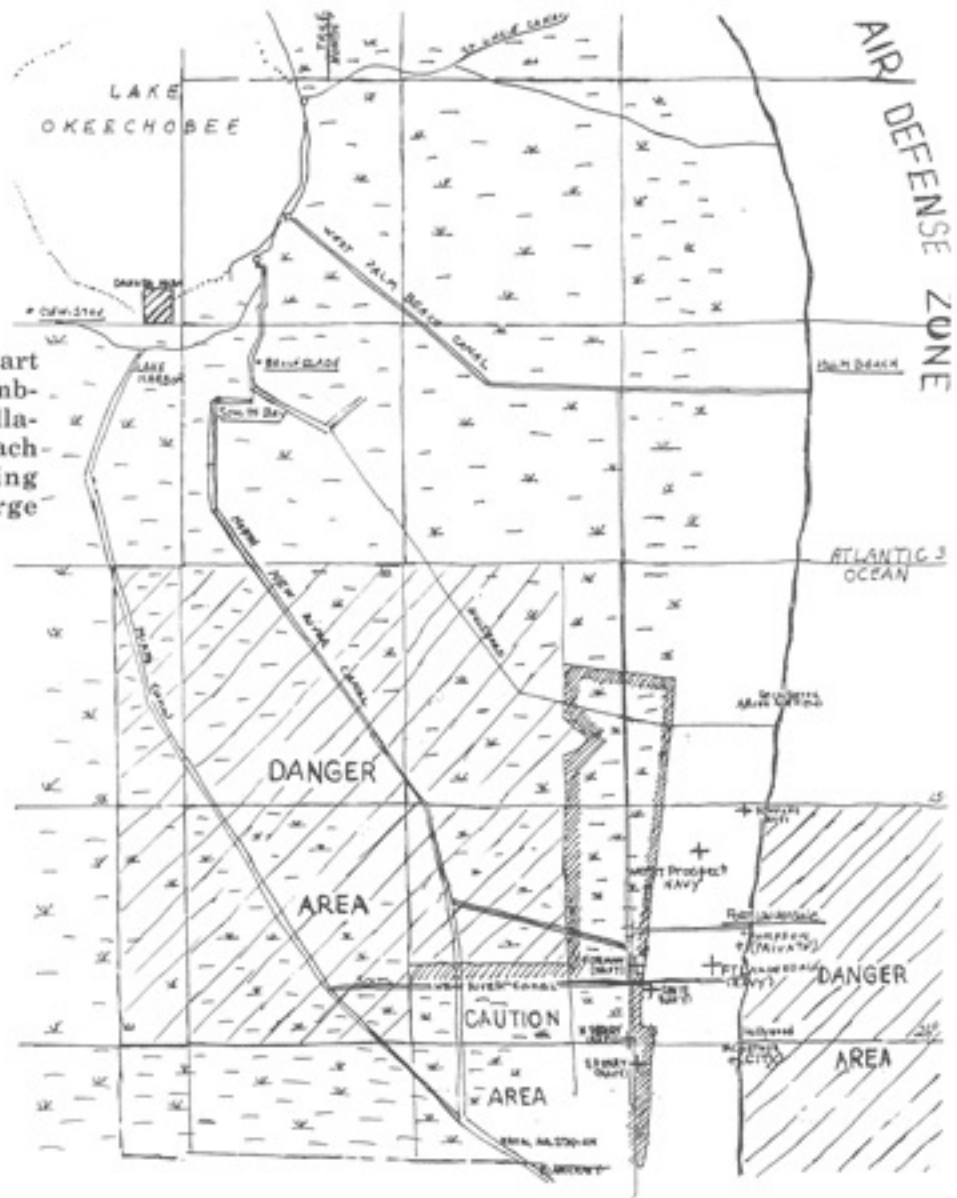
Early in my tour here, I nearly 'bought the farm,' as they say. I was flying in an SNJ up to an outlying field north of Opa-locka to observe my charges during field carrier landings. I was tooling along at 4,000 feet and feeling fine. I began to think how long it had been since I had an airplane on its back, and decided to get some of the cobwebs out of my system. I looked at the altimeter, and then looked over the side. I climbed to 5,000 feet. After looking that over, I climbed to 6,000 feet. I decided to start with a nice, easy roll. Everything was beautiful until I got on my back and the nose started down just a little too much. Being accustomed to that big TBF, I pushed the nose up too much and stalled the right wing. On an SNJ the right wing will stall a split second before the left one, and it's enough to cause violent reactions. When I quit gyrating, I was headed straight down. I had not forgotten all of this — I just didn't remember it. I pulled out right over the treetops, going like a bat out of hell. That got me mad, so I went back up and kicked the devil out of that plane. I guess I shouldn't have taken it out on the airplane, but I had to prove to myself that I could do it.²¹

Later in his book, Ensign Gay wrote about the low level flying he called "legalized flat hatting" — flying everywhere at tree or housetop level, and, over the ocean, nicking the waves with the propellers. The farmers frequently complained to the base commanders about their cows being scared and stampeded. However, Mrs. Annabel Perry, Henry's wife, recalled that their animals eventually became immune to the noise and would only look up in curiosity as the planes flew above their pastures.²² With more than a dozen bases in the Miami-Fort Lauderdale area, several squadrons could be in the air at one time, with the roar of engines



The North Perry operations building and control tower as it appeared in the 1980s.

Detail of a 1944 aeronautical chart of south Florida, showing bombing ranges and military installations in Broward and Palm Beach counties and the surrounding areas (map courtesy of George Cordes, Clewiston Museum).



a fact of life, day and night. The ocean, Lake Okeechobee, and many sections of the Everglades, including what is now C.B. Smith Park in Pembroke Pines, were used as bombing ranges.²³ Gunnery schools were established at Riverside Military Academy in Hollywood, on the Dade-Broward line north of Opa-locka, and late in the war, at North Perry Air Field.²⁴ With the high number of flights, many planes crashed, and to this day wrecks are found in remote areas of the Everglades, and old bombs are hooked by fishermen.²⁵

With its massive production and manpower training capacity, America's stunning early losses of territory, ships, planes and personnel were overcome, and victory was assured. After the war ended dramatically when the U.S. dropped two atomic bombs on Japan in August, 1945, many military airfields were retained in Florida for some time. A tragic occurrence of Broward's post-war time period was the mysterious loss of five Avengers with fifteen crew members on December 5, 1945. The planes flew out over the Atlantic from Fort Lauderdale on a routine training mission, and for reasons still not fully under-

stood, disappeared without a trace. The "Lost Flight" has since become a chief element in the "Bermuda Triangle" legend.²⁶

Accounts of wartime Fort Lauderdale and Hollywood tell of community efforts to entertain the military members in their leisure hours — Broward County was a good posting, and the fine times enjoyed by the trainees were a major factor in the post-war population boom as many ex-service people returned to live permanently.²⁷

Fort Lauderdale Naval Air Station reverted to the county, when no longer needed, eventually becoming Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport. The West Prospect Road field is now Executive Airport, and Pompano Field is a general aviation facility. Thanks to pioneer Davie dairyman Hamilton M. Forman, Forman Field became the South Florida Education Center, containing Nova University, Broward Community College Central Campus, Nova High School, Nova Middle School, and Nova, Blanche Forman and Eisenhower Elementary Schools.²⁸ Davie Field was returned to the Forman family.

South Perry was again used as

pasture for awhile, and later became part of the City of Miramar, which incorporated in 1955. North Perry was at first leased to, and then, in October 1957, deeded to Broward County.²⁹ It now operates as a busy general aviation installation, with upgraded, lighted runways and a free-standing control tower. Broward Community College South Campus offers aviation courses as well as academic studies at its 100-acre site in the northeast corner of the field.

North Perry's original Operations Building has been preserved by its leaseholder, and now houses a restaurant, offices and an aviation accessory shop. It is one of only a few structures that still exist from hundreds put up in haste during the war emergency.³⁰ A few World War II dump sites at North Perry have yielded some worthwhile artifacts, such as live .30 and .50 caliber bullets, dozens of empty shell casings, hundreds of bullet links, USN cafeteria china, cutlery and food trays, gun barrels and machinery parts, all small reminders of Broward County's significant participation in the exciting war years, when there were bombers over Broward.³¹

Footnotes

1. Stuart B. McIver, *Fort Lauderdale and Broward County, An Illustrated History* (Woodland Hills, Calif.: Windsor Publications, 1983), 118-120.

2. Chariton W. Tebeau, *A History of Florida* (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1971), 416-417.

3. George F. Pearce, *The U.S. Navy in Pensacola* (Pensacola: University Presses of Florida, 1980), 132.

4. Frank S. FitzGerald-Bush, *A Dream of Araby, Glenn H. Curtiss And the Founding of Opa-locka* (Opa-locka: South Florida Archaeological Museum, 1976), 21, 25.

5. John McCollister and Diane Ramsden, *The Sky Is Home* (Miami: Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, 1986), 53-70.

6. Sally Van Wagenen Keil, *Those Wonderful Women In Their Flying Machines* (New York: Rawson, Wade Publishers, Inc., 1979), 113. The women trained at several fields throughout the country. They qualified in all types of war planes, from P-51 Mustangs to B-29 bombers, but were not allowed to fly them out of the United States.

7. August Burghard and Philip Weidling, *Checkered Sunshine, The Story of Fort Lauderdale 1793-1955* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1966), 213.

8. History of the U.S. Naval Air Station, Miami, Florida, 1 December, 1944. Manuscript in U.S. Navy Archives, Washington, D.C.

9. Warren J. Brown, *Florida's Aviation History: The First 100 Years* (Largo: Aero-Medical Consultants, Inc., 1980).

10. Mrs. Annabel Perry, Oral History Transcript, from March 2, 1982 interview, Miramar, Florida. Copy in archives of Broward County Historical Commission.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Newspaper clippings in H.D. Perry scrapbooks, Broward County Historical Commission archives.

13. History of U.S. Naval Air Station, Miami, Florida, 1 December, 1944.

14. Author's telephone interviews with Jim Logan, Luray Caverns, Virginia, 1989. Logan was a World War II trainee at North Perry Field.

15. "North Perry Airport Filled With History," *The Pembroke Mirror*, March 6, 1985.

16. Robert R. Rea, U.S.N., *Wings of Gold: An Account of Naval Aviation Training in World War II* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1987), 261-287.

17. George Gay, U.S.N.R., *Sole Survivor* (Naples: Midway Publishers, 1980), 58-59, 240-241, 245, 246-247; Photographs in possession of Tony Restaino, a Florida Aero Club member at North Perry, which were obtained from Jim Logan of Luray Caverns, Virginia, who trained at North Perry Airport during the war.

18. Mark Meyer and Walter Boyne, *Classics* (Charlottesville, Va.: Howell Press, Inc., 1987) contains information on TBM Avengers, F4F Wildcats, and P6F Hellcats.

19. "Pilot of TBF Hits Torpedo, Saves Carrier," *Fort Lauderdale Daily News*, October 15, 1944.

20. Meyer and Boyne, *Classics*, 136-139.

21. Gay, *Sole Survivor*, 247.

22. Annabel Perry Oral History Transcript.

23. Aeronautical Chart of South Florida, 1944, courtesy of George C. Cordes, Clewiston Museum, Clewiston.

24. Virginia Elliott TenEick, *History of Hollywood (1920 to 1950)* (Hollywood: City of Hollywood, 1966), 379-80; History of U.S. Naval Air Station, Miami, Florida, 1 December, 1944.

25. "Old Bomb Fished Out Of Trail in Loxahatchee Refuge," *Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel*, November 13, 1984.

26. McIver, *Fort Lauderdale and Broward County*, 119-120.

27. TenEick, *History of Hollywood*, 386-388, 407.

28. Charles Forman, "The Forman Family: Everglades Pioneers," *Broward Legacy*, vol. 3, numbers 3 & 4 (Fall 1979), 8-9.

29. Quitclaim Deed, executed between the U.S. Government and the Broward County Commission, October 22, 1957, copy in Broward County Historical Commission archives.

30. "Pines Agreement May Save Historic North Perry Site," *Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel*, August 23, 1989.

31. Kenneth J. Hughes and Gerry Witoshynsky, "Report On The Archaeological Investigation Of North Perry Auxiliary Naval Air Station For The Broward County Historical Commission And The Pembroke Pines Historical Society," July 1989, copy in Broward County Historical Commission archives.