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IN FREEDOM'S FRONT YARD



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IN FREEDOM'S FRONT YARD

By Dave Petraglia

Story photos by the author except where noted

Cover photo by Dave Petraglia

At one time, what is now Reynolds Industrial Park here was Lee Naval Air Station. It was home to as many as 20,000 sailors. 5,000 Navy and Marine Corps pilots trained here on Wildcats, Hellcats and Corsairs.

The facilities, the piers and airfields of Green Cove Springs, were the 'front yard' in our country's preparations for the defense of the world's liberty over 75 years ago.

'The Race For Berlin' started all over again this century in a field alongside the Military Museum of North Florida off Route 16. For three days last February, the Museum, together with the Military Vehicle Preservation Association (MVPA) hosted armor and artillery fielded by WW2 Armor of Deltona. Restored Sherman tanks, a 155mm 'Long Tom' M2, and 50 caliber machine guns made my morning coffee jiggle on our patio table, I can attest, 3 ½ miles as the crow flies from our house.

Manned entirely by full-time, paid staff and part-time volunteers, the 'reenactors' share a dedication to the duty that their parents and grandparents displayed in the war in which they served.

According to W. Michael Houk, WW2 Armor Chief of Staff, "WW2 Armor's role in this event is to demonstrate WWII-authentic use of tanks and armored fighting vehicles



by engaging the senses of spectators in both hourly salute firings and an afternoon battle alongside reenactors. We really want them to get a feel for what it must have been like for service members on a European battlefield in 1944 and 45. It's one thing to see a still photo or watch a video, but when you go in person, in addition to the "boom" you might expect, you feel it in your chest, you smell the engines and hear the tracks. There are few spectacles quite like seeing a 46 or 33 ton tank maneuver on its objective, let alone a group of them... and with artillery support!"

Plans are underway to ring in spring 2022

with a similar event scheduled for March 25-27.

In addition to the convoy of military vehicles and field pieces, which can easily run north of 160 tons, trained personnel are key.

"At the last Green Cove Springs event we had the pleasure of working with about 50 U.S. and German reenactors." Mike said. "They really bring with them a great deal of historical knowledge. Their presence on the battlefield adds a great deal in the way of humanity in contrast to the tonnage of our armor which is anything but."



'Full battle-rattle'

Two things highly sought after: gleaming brass 50-cal shell casings still warm to the touch.

And earplugs.

Several veterans worked the crowd as the tanks rumbled into position, handing out earplugs. The guys I was standing with shrugged.

"You'll thank me," the old-timer assured him. We both put in the plugs.

With the first 75mm round from a Sherman, he and I both looked around for the vet. To thank. As Mike Houk stated, you really feel the report in your chest. And then some.

Next, the .50 cal's kicked in, and the barrage from the Shermans found a regular cadence.

The reenactors flowed through the landscape, and 'The Race For Berlin' was underway.

'Policing the brass'

Once the tanks ground to a halt, the crowd descended like a flock of seagulls on a freshly-plowed field, combing through the fresh, soft ruts, hot on the trail of the remnants of the .50 cal machine-gun bursts from the vehicles. The bright brass casings, the size of magic-markers, were the prize. Kids and seniors alike beamed as they held up their treasures for all to see.

The yearly event hosts perhaps a hundred vendors, with everything 'military memorabilia' available for purchase, as well as food and beverages. It's very well organized, with Clay High ROTC volunteers guiding visitors to free and very convenient parking. In addition to tank crew and infantry skills demonstrations, there are MVPA military vehicle displays from all eras. One popular attraction was the Army Aviation Heritage Foundation & Flying Museum rides in a Vietnam era UH-1 Huey helicopter over the Reynolds Park landscape.

At February's event, they burned through 2,000 machine gun and 350 tank rounds, according to Houk.

'Lobbing some HEAT'

No, WW2 Armor does not fire 'saluting' rounds. "Our different vehicles have different shell casings that are appropriate to that gun. These guns are 100% licensed and authentic. A 75mm shell casing for a Sherman tank might have one or two pounds of black powder in it. A standard load for the Long Tom "shell" is about 8 pounds."

WW2 Armor's schedule is year-round. "In a year without COVID we might attend between four and five events. Most are in Florida. When we're not attending an event, we're training in the off months at our private facility near Orlando. We train for authenticity, and most importantly, safety. These things don't care who they hurt, and in order to share them with the public we have to make sure we keep high standards in their operation. This means coordination between our crews, our event



Photo by Jon Soucy



Photo by Jon Soucy



hosts and also the reenactors. While what we do is unique and extraordinarily fun, safety is an extremely serious business.”

“To date, our farthest event from home is the annual D-Day reenactment in Conneaut, Ohio. Most events are in Florida, but we’ve got an eye on a couple more out-of-state events and are always on the lookout for other opportunities.”

“The owner, Rabbi Rob Thomas, is the President and CEO of the not-for-profit WW2 Armor. He describes himself as a very fortunate man who believes blessings are best when shared. He shares by enabling WW2 Armor to bring this unique aspect of history to the public in honor of the veterans his collection represents.”

Come next March, you can experience up close and personally, the excitement of Thomas’ generosity along with that of the many hundreds of volunteers that make the event such a success. You don’t want to miss this!

After all, it’s pretty much in your front yard.



Photo by Jon Soucy



The Military Museum of North Florida

1 Bunker Avenue

Green Cove Springs 32043

Monday - Wednesday: Closed

Thursday- Saturday: 10 AM - 3 PM

Sunday: 12 PM - 4 PM

Contact (904) 410-0781

militarymuseumnf@aol.com

www.themilitarymuseumofnorthflorida.com