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World War II and Florida Baptist Life

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WORLD WAR II AND FLORIDA BAPTIST LIFE

As the 1940s began, Florida was still reeling from the effects of the Depression. However, the Sunshine State soon benefited from the growing World War II in which the United States was unceremoniously drawn into by the Japanese attack upon Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The evolving war-driven opportunities, “produced dramatic economic, demographic and cultural shifts in Florida,” observed Florida Baptist historian Mark Rathel.¹ Similar assessments were made by University of South Florida history professor Gary R. Mormino who wrote, “Not since the giddy years of the early 1920s had Floridians seen signs of recovery and growth.”² The economic stimulus was generated by the unprecedented development of military installations across the Florida landscape that eventually numbered 172 at the height of the war effort. Profitable Federal government contracts for everything from housing to materials to foodstuffs, “revived the state’s agricultural and manufacturing sectors,” including the state’s previously moribund ship-building industry, which “shared in the bonanza,” Mormino explained.³ With the prosperity followed an influx of new residents. Many were military personnel and their families assigned to the burgeoning military installations. Many others came to Florida in search of new opportunities in employment and a new way of life. And even as the war and its supporting industries began to wind down by 1945, many military veterans and temporary workers decided to make Florida their new permanent home. During the decade Florida’s population increased 46.1 percent compared to the 15 percent growth of the U. S. population.⁴

Florida Baptists Responded to War Efforts

Yet the war did exact many sacrifices from Floridians generally and from Florida Baptists and their churches in varied ways. Many men and women quickly volunteered for military service, particularly after the December 7, 1941, Japanese attack upon Pearl Harbor. Many other Floridians were inducted into the military services as a result of the first peacetime draft in American history.⁵ For those Florida Baptists who went to war, their home churches did not forget them. Many churches actively sought to keep awareness among the church members’ collective memory and prayer concerns for those men and women. Many churches posted in their sanctuaries Honor Rolls that listed the member’s name and branch of service. “At every gathering special prayers were offered for each person in service,” as one church’s history book explained.⁶ And yet the well-being for the church members at war went beyond the official and public expressions of concerns. Among individual members genuine interest and concern was exhibited with more than hugs and quick kisses on the cheek. Often members, demonstrating a heartfelt empathy, would ask each other if they had received any recent information about their loved one or where they were stationed – although censored military mail made getting such basic information difficult at best. It was the close-knit and spiritual bond among church members that seemed to provide the greatest source of strength and encouragement to help offset the worries of the unknown and fearful concerns for the loved one’s safety.

By 1943, an estimated 300,000 Floridians volunteered for civilian defense activities – including service in the Red Cross and the United Service Organization (U.S.O.) – which provided morale boosting and recreation services to the uniformed military personnel

stationed across the state. Volunteers also served on draft and rationing boards.⁷ Some churches, like First Baptist, Brandon, reported that their Woman's Missionary Society, "joined the war effort" by making Red Cross requested supplies.⁸ Those women's groups prepared knitted stretch bandages for military medical units, made socks, sweaters and fingerless mitts, among other garments, for military personnel stationed overseas. State WMU president Theo Thomas (Mrs. Robert) Lee, in her 1943 message to the Florida WMU annual meeting cautioned the women to be judicious in their community service at the expense of their local church's ministry. "We must not substitute canteen work for community missions; we must not substitute nurse's classes for mission study classes; we must not substitute the study of war maps of this world for the blood-stained trail of human redemption taught us in the Bible; we must not substitute the giving of ten percent in the purchase of war bonds and stamps for bringing the tithe to the store house of God. Moreover, we must not lose ourselves in the doing of only humanitarian deeds. Our task is far more comprehensive than that; our task is ever to hold before the world the Kingdom of God."⁹

Southern Baptists Responded Through Relief Efforts

Congregations from Miami to Palatka to Pensacola participated in the collection of relief goods, clothing, Bibles and funds for overseas refugees. Those solicitation efforts included the Russian Kit Campaign, Testaments for Armed Forces and War Prisoners, and China refugee relief, among others. In addition to promoting the commodities collection, the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, between 1942-1945, also raised and spent over \$1.1 million for world relief efforts. In 1946 the Southern Baptist Convention, in response to a request from the Foreign Mission Board, undertook a "world emergency offering" which garnered \$3.9 million which was \$400,000 greater than its \$3.5 million goal. To their credit, Florida Baptists exceeded their own \$150,850 goal by over 200 percent and contributed in excess of \$300,000 to the world relief offering.¹⁰ The emergency funds, according to the Foreign Board, were earmarked for relief and rehabilitation in many war torn countries. The special offering ensured that regular Cooperative Program and Lottie Moon Offering proceeds would not be diverted from missionary efforts.¹¹ In addition to providing aid to war-displaced refugees, First Baptist Church, Cocoa, like so many other churches, annually collected money to purchase and send Christmas gifts – such as toiletry items – to their members serving in the military.¹²

Rationing and Sharing of Resources

The Federal government's need for strategic materials to produce military equipment – ranging from weaponry to tanks, to ships to aircraft – resulted in Floridians' collective efforts to conserve and collect rubber, scrap metal, rags, paper, and grease. Additionally, victory gardens and "meatless" days were initiated as a means to stretch the nation's food resources. Ration books, which regulated what could be purchased and when, were issued to each person in a household. By November 1943, these limited availability items included fuel oil, coffee, stoves, shoes, meat, lard, shortening and oils, cheese, butter, margarine, processed foods (canned, bottled and frozen), dried fruits, canned milk, firewood and coal, jams, jellies and fruit butter. To deter hoarding, the ration stamps were only good for a specific time period. Gasoline rationing became so severe by 1943, that all forms of "pleasure driving" were declared illegal.¹³

Florida Baptist churches responded to the food rationing in a variety of creative ways. As an example, Miami's Central Baptist Church's history narrative noted, "Because of wartime rationing, careful planning was required even for a church social. People would pool their ration coupons for such an event."¹⁴ To deal with the gasoline and rubber tire shortages, those Baptists who had vehicles either opted to walk to church, or would carpool or just stay at home on Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings. Pastors, who had ministry visits and other travel responsibilities, although exempt from driving restrictions, resorted to alternate transportation. Retilla Leitch, in her history of the First Baptist Church, Marianna, wrote that, "The pastor bought a bicycle and wheeled all over town visiting wherever there was a need. During hot weather he wore short sleeve and open collar shirts. Until then no other pastor dared be seen downtown without wearing a coat and tie."¹⁵

A Void of Information on the War's Progress

Were it not for secular newspaper and radio reports, Florida Baptists did not get any real information about the war from their denominational sources. "E.D. Solomon, editor of the *Florida Baptist Witness*, rarely editorialized about the war," observed Mark Rathel. The Baptist historian noted, the *Witness* basically "lacked information about the war." Surprisingly, just thirty-eight days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, with the Florida Baptist State Convention meeting in Panama City, messengers approved four resolutions regarding the war. According to Rathel, "First the convention prayed for our nation. The State Board of Missions report applied a temperance prayer to the crisis facing the nation, noting, 'Oh God, help us to live like Jesus and fight like the devil.' Second, the convention sent a resolution encouraging President Roosevelt to use his emergency powers to establish a national prohibition." Rathel, in a journal article about Florida Baptists during World War II, explained that, "Baptists expressed a willingness to make any sacrifice to win the war." However, messengers approved a "resolution to governmental leaders asking for a religious-workers exemption for gas and tire rationing," Rathel noted.¹⁶

War conditions which affected train service, restriction on automobile travel and the limited availability of hotel accommodations, caused the January 13 - 15, 1943, State Convention's annual meeting to be moved to Jacksonville from Orlando.¹⁷ Later the Federal government issued a directive that banned "all conventions of an attendance of more than fifty" persons convening after February 1, 1945. As a consequence, the Southern Baptist Convention's planned Centennial Convention celebration scheduled for Atlanta, May 8-13, 1945, was cancelled. The gathering was to include a pilgrimage to Augusta, the birthplace of the national convention in 1845.¹⁸

Women Filled Church Leadership Roles

The most noticeable effect upon Florida Baptist churches during the war was the absence of able bodied and healthy young and middle-aged male members most of whom had either volunteered or were drafted into the military services. To fill the leadership void in many congregations, more women were pressed into service. They assumed practically every position previously held by men, with the exception of the role of pastor.

As one church narrative explained, "Women had played important roles throughout the church's history; however, in the 1940's, women played important leadership roles much

as they were doing in society at large. With so many men serving in the military, positions traditionally filled by men were filled by women.”¹⁹

However, churches without pastoral leadership – whether fulltime, halftime or quarter time – during the war years depended upon the available and committed older men and women to lead Bible studies, Wednesday night prayer meetings and Sunday worship services. And sadly, other churches, particularly those in the rural areas of the state, literally went out of business due to the lack of pastoral leadership and members who moved away during the war years.

Ministry and Evangelism Opportunities

Pastors, responding to their patriotic yearning and spiritual calling, enlisted as wartime chaplains, serving primarily in the Army and the Navy. By December, 1945, there were 1,254 Southern Baptists chaplains in the armed services, although the exact number of Florida Baptist pastor/chaplains is not known.²⁰ Other Florida Baptist pastors chose to remain on their church field and ministered to their local congregation.

Unless a pastor was registered as a volunteer chaplain, access to Florida’s military installations was restricted. As a result, a pastor’s efforts focused upon getting the military personnel off their bases and into the church. Many church leaders viewed the thousands of military service personnel as potential opportunities for ministry and evangelism outreach. Some churches secured busses to transport soldiers and sailors from their military base to Sunday school, Sunday morning and evening worship services.²¹

Miami Pastor Roy Angell’s evangelistic efforts targeted foreign military personnel who were being trained in Miami area military bases. In one instance a Sunday school class organized for Chinese naval trainees, resulted in thirteen making professions of faith and being baptized in the Central Baptist Church.²² Pensacola’s First Baptist Church reported that because the soldiers were often confined to their base on Sundays, some Baptist young men would invite fellow soldiers into their barracks or tents to listen to the radio broadcast of the local Baptist church’s worship services.²³ In contrast, Roy Angell sent transcripts of his Sunday sermons to military personnel stationed overseas.²⁴

On Sunday evenings, many churches hosted a fellowship time with refreshments for military personnel to mingle with the church’s young people and young adults. Special event banquets and Christmas parties for the military personnel also were held. Other churches encouraged their members to open their homes and provide home-cooked meals for military personnel stationed at nearby camps. First Baptist Church, West Palm Beach, beginning in late-1942, hosted a monthly post-Sunday service dinner on the grounds in the city’s Bethesda Park. Each month all military personnel at one of the area’s three military camps were invited to join the church members for a Sunday morning worship service followed by the luncheon.²⁵

Churches’ Growth and Giving

During the war years, Florida Baptist church membership grew at a slow but steady pace – overall 17 percent – to a high of 199,483 members by the war’s end. This growth was

aided, in part, by an increased emphasis upon evangelism and personal soul-winning. Those outreach efforts resulted in an unprecedented annual average 9,269 baptisms between the years 1941 and 1945. Although, it should be noted that the overall baptism average was heavily affected by a record setting (in the State Convention's first 90 years history) 13,173 baptisms reported for the church year 1944-1945. However, as Mark Rathel candidly noted, "Baptist church membership declined as a percentage of state population from 8.55 percent in 1940 to 8.28 percent in 1946."²⁶

To financially underwrite the government's efforts to help to sustain military initiatives in Europe and Asia, Americans were encouraged to purchase war bonds and government-issued saving stamps which when accumulated to a certain value could be redeemed for bonds. Church minutes reported the authorization by several Florida Baptist congregations to purchase war bonds and encouraged members to purchase the bonds and stamps. Florida Baptists benefited from the war-driven economy.

As previously noted by Gary Mormino's assessment, "The war provided Floridians, accustomed to decades of depression and scarcity, a taste of prosperity and abundance."²⁷ That prosperity apparently translated into a nearly three-fold increase in the annual financial contributions made to Florida Baptist churches between 1940 and 1945.

Specifically, in 1940 the 808 reporting churches had combined receipts that totaled \$1,572,260 that was an annual average \$1,945 per church. By the end of the war years, the 833 reporting churches had combined receipts that totaled \$4,629,407 that was an annual average \$5,557 per church. This meant the typical Florida Baptist's gifts had increased to \$23.21 for the year 1945 from an average contribution of \$9.68 five years earlier. Those increased contributions helped many churches to reduce or eliminate indebtedness incurred during the prior decade when the construction of new sanctuaries was the fad.²⁸

German Spies and Church Safety

Church leadership also recognized their church facilities' potential vulnerability from German naval and air force attacks along the Florida coastline. Although there were no attacks on Florida military installations, German submarines or U-boats maintained patrols along Florida's east coast and Gulf of Mexico. Between January and August 1942 alone the U-boats torpedoed 24 cargo ships.

To further heighten Floridians' wartime anxiety, by March 1941, practically every unit of the Florida National Guard had been federalized and deployed for war service in Europe and elsewhere. In response the Florida Legislature authorized the establishment of the State Defense Council of Florida, to develop, among other things, a Florida Defense Force, a form of home guard. Local civilian defense units throughout the state were recruited, trained and equipped for service as an armed force to meet any military threat, to patrol beaches watching for enemy military activity and to respond to any civilian emergencies, such as hurricane relief.²⁹

The value and need for a home guard was soon underscored. In June, 1942, one of two teams of German spies and saboteurs disembark from a U-boat off the Atlantic coast of

Ponte Vedra, near Jacksonville. Their mission was to plant explosives to damage industrial and transportation facilities along the Middle Atlantic States. Fortunately, within two weeks all the saboteurs were arrested by F.B.I. agents. Soon thereafter the eight Germans were tried by a military tribunal, found guilty and sentenced to death. Although justice was swift for those Germans, countless hundreds of German civilians, sailors, soldiers and pilots were involuntarily brought to the state to be interned in a group of prisoner of war camps established across Florida. The occasional escape by some of these POWs further heightened the anxiety of Floridians.³⁰

With the growing concern over homeland safety, many churches purchased special insurance coverage in the event of a bombing or collateral damage sustained to a church building if a nearby military installation was attacked. "Churches were not immune from the sense of anxiety and insecurity that World War II produced," Douglas Weaver of Gainesville's First Baptist Church reported. "In 1942, First Baptist purchased bomb insurance for its church building and parsonage. It was renewed annually until the war ended."³¹

The growing wartime anxiety and insecurity felt by many Baptists often was addressed by pastors in sermons and their writings in church bulletins. As an example, Pensacola pastor Wallace Rogers, recognized the vulnerability of Pensacola's large naval installations, particularly after the 1941 attack at Pearl Harbor. "The time has gone when we can think of the whole business as a pink tea. It is grim reality. The pastors of the city are planning to take training in first aid and perhaps in other necessary fields, and they expect their people to do the same. Optimism is fine, silly optimism is unforgivable. Face facts with courage, but face them and do your best," Rogers wrote.³² In the end, people endured the wartime inconveniences in the name of patriotism, national pride and even the reality that "we are all in this together."

Florida Baptists' Response to War's End

Finally, the year 1945 marked the end of the war and the attendant hardships it had caused, as the Germans surrendered in May and the Japanese surrendered in September. There was a collective sigh of relief and prayers of thanksgiving offered by Florida Baptists and others. Church history writer Lora Sinks Britt made an understated observation concerning the war's end by noting, "The day the news came was indeed a happy one."³³ Other chroniclers of Florida Baptist church life during the war years offered summary assessments. "It was time in which servicemen returned home to their families. This time of emerging triumph for the Allies in war was matched by a growing spirit of accomplishment by the First Baptist Church of Cocoa," wrote later pastor Frank Thomas.³⁴ And finally, Tampa author William Shearouse noted, "Military personnel began returning home. Families and friends, as well as churches, welcomed them with open arms."³⁵

There is no known count of the number of Florida Baptists who served during the war nor is there a specific accounting of Baptists who died or were wounded, in the service of their country. For the many who died or were wounded in battle, their home church prepared appropriate memorials that ranged from permanent wall plaque tributes to tombstone memorials in the church cemetery. Even the Florida Baptist Children's Home was not

immune from the war's pall of death. Superintendent T. M. Johns reported that 34 boys and one girl had joined the armed services. In October, 1942, the superintendent announced that one of those former Home residents – James Herman Hall – had been killed in military action.³⁶

Florida Baptist War Heros

Four Florida Baptists gained limited fame as a result of their actions during the war. These included a posthumously decorated pilot hero, a Christian missionary martyr, a prisoner of war pilot who served as a de-facto chaplain, and the only Florida Baptist pastor-chaplain who died in non-combat service was honored during the 1946 Southern Baptist Convention.

Madison Native Colin Kelly, Jr.

Madison native, U. S. Army Air Corps Captain (first lieutenant) Colin P. Kelly, Jr., supposedly received a posthumous Congressional Medal of Honor for his actions just three days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. On a reconnaissance mission flying out of Clark Field in Luzon, Philippines, the 26-year-old West Point graduate and B-17 bomber pilot made a bomb drop which was believed at the time to be upon the Japanese heavy cruiser Haruna. The attack upon the flotilla placed Kelly's B-17C at the mercy of ten Japanese Navy fighter Zeros that proceeded to attack with such a fury the bomber caught on fire. Kelly ordered all his crew to bail out while he struggled to keep the plane airborne before the B-17 exploded in midair. However, the initial widespread news reports over-dramatized Kelly's actions by incorrectly reporting that he had dived his B-17C into a Japanese battleship that was sunk. Kelly's supposed actions were characterized by Florida Governor Spessard Holland as a "feat of courage and military daring." President Franklin D. Roosevelt cited Kelly's reported actions to rally and inspire Americans, who were still shocked and seething with anger over the sneak attack at Pearl Harbor. Literally overnight Kelly's memory had risen to national hero status.³⁷

Hyperbole aside, Captain Kelly did drop three bombs on the Japanese battleship Ashigara which did sink. But he only was awarded posthumously the Distinguished Service Cross – the nation's second highest award for heroism – for his actions that also saved the lives of his crew. Although in childhood Kelly attended the First Presbyterian Church in Madison, Florida, he did have a Florida Baptist connection. He was the great grandson of Florida Baptist pioneer Richard Johnson Mays. Instrumental in the formation of the Florida Baptist State Convention in 1854, Mays served as its first president.

Missionary Martyr Rufus Gray

Rufus Franklin Gray, who was in his second year of service as a Southern Baptist missionary to China, was arrested, jailed and killed by Japanese intelligence forces. The 26-year-old native of Titusville had been a member of the First Baptist Church, Ft. Pierce, prior to being sent to Chinese language school in 1941. Japanese military invasions into China forced the Baptist missionary personnel to re-locate to the Philippines. Unfortunately, in December, 1941, Japanese troops invaded the Philippines and 175 missionaries and 225 civilians were arrested, separated by gender and placed in prison camps.

Gray was accused of being a spy because he had taken many pictures while in Peking (photography was his hobby) and had made friends among the Chinese. Although no related Japanese government records have been found, other missionaries who were interrogated along with Gray, offered eyewitness accounts. They surmised that Rufus Gray died sometime between January 25 and 28, 1942, while being subjected to water torture at the hands of Japanese intelligence officers.³⁸ Gray holds the distinction of being the only Southern Baptist missionary to die from war-related hostilities.

Unfortunately, Gray's status as a Christian missionary martyr received little notice in the secular or denominational press. Gray's wife Marian, along with their infant son and seven other missionaries, remained interned in a Japanese prisoner of war camp until February, 1945. After her release Marian Peeler Gray spent the ensuing years attempting to collect the facts surrounding her husband's unannounced death and unknown burial location.

P.O.W. Pilot Bill Rittenhouse

William H. "Bill" Rittenhouse, Jr., the son of a Miami pastor, served as a lieutenant in the U. S. Army Air Corps assigned to a B-17 bomber squadron attached to the 15th Air Force Group. In May, 1944, the 22-year-old pilot was flying one of 38 bombers assigned to travel from their African base to Ploesti, Rumania, to drop bombs on German controlled oil fields. After making the initial bomb drop, Rittenhouse's plane was hit by enemy munitions which started a fire in the fuselage of the armored B-17 – then one of the world's largest, heaviest, fastest and highest- flying production bombers. After ensuring that his nine-member crew had safely bailed out of the burning plane, and although wounded, Rittenhouse parachuted into Rumania where he was captured. He and his fellow airmen were placed in a former German military camp that had been converted into a prisoner of war jail run by Rumanian soldiers.

During his several months as a P.O.W., Rittenhouse, who was well known among his fellow airmen for his Christian testimony and witness, became a de-facto lay chaplain to his fellow military war prisoners. He led worship services, conducted Bible studies and provided spiritual counseling. In August, 1944, Rittenhouse and five fellow airmen escaped from their German garrison and spent the next six weeks hiding in the countryside before being rescued by U.S. forces. In September, he was transferred to the United States and was relieved from active duty. In addition to being promoted to the rank of Captain, Rittenhouse was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, Bronze Star, Air medal with three Oak Leaf clusters, and the Purple Heart medals. He returned to Miami to serve as interim pastor of the Southside Baptist Church, during the absence of his father, the pastor, who was serving as a chaplain overseas.³⁹ Having recognized God's calling upon his life, Rittenhouse resumed his college career – subsequently earning a PhD from Duke Divinity School – and entered the ministry. He initially served as education director at Lakeland's Southside Baptist Church. Ten years after the war, Rittenhouse wrote a book about his Christian witness while serving in the military and as a prisoner of war.⁴⁰

Florida Chaplain William Roberts

As noted previously, 1,254 Southern Baptist chaplains were a mainstay for Army and Navy units. As the war came to a conclusion, the Army Chief of Chaplains reported that

through September, 1945, a total 78 military chaplains had been killed in action and another 66 died in non-combat activity. Among the deceased were 12 Southern Baptists.⁴¹ One of those twelve chaplains was Florida Baptist Army Reserve Captain William Nolan Roberts. At age 38, the former pastor of Tampa's Ballast Point Baptist Church, died in a September 20, 1943, military airplane crash in North Carolina.⁴² He was among the twelve chaplains honored during the 1946 annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention held in Miami.⁴³

Florida's United States Senator Claude Pepper, a member of Miami's Central Baptist Church, observed that, "Victory could not have been ours without unity among the Allies and unity among the people at home."⁴⁴

Tom Brokaw called the men and women who served in World War II the "Greatest Generation."⁴⁵ And among that generation were thousands of Florida Baptists who served directly in the war effort and indirectly by "keeping the home fires burning" in churches all across the Sunshine State. To that great generation of Florida Baptists a great debt of gratitude is owed.

ENDNOTES:

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