

Arcadia Rotary Club honors British Cadets: 10 a.m., Memorial Day, May 30, Oak Ridge Cemetery



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This Memorial Day, the Arcadia Rotary Club will again honor and remember the 23 British cadets buried in Oak Ridge Cemetery. Last May, concerns about the spread of COVID-19 spurred the Club to cancel the ceremony held annually since 1956.

Rotarian Paul Seusy, who coordinates the event, wrote, "One of Rotary International's key missions is to end Polio. . . . When the pandemic began, the Rotary Club saw obvious parallels between the Coronavirus and Polio, in that it is an airborne virus which occasionally cripples or kills those infected. . . . Now, in 2021, when many people have been vaccinated, and it appears that outdoor events are far less risky than indoor events, the Rotary Club decided that this was worth the effort."

During World War I, the U.S. Army had built two aviation camps to train pilots: Carlstrom and Dorr Fields. They remained open after Armistice Day, but were finally closed in the early 1920s. Having learned to fly at Carlstrom Field, John Paul Riddle remembered the location when the U.S. wanted to train pilots before the U.S. entered World War II.

The Dec. 5, 1940, "Arcadian" reported that "Arcadia was visited yesterday morning about 10:30 by a board of inspectors for the Air Corps of the U.S. Army . . . the purpose of the trip was to determine the advisability of granting permission, and the leasing of Carlstrom Field, for a privately-operated school of flying instruction for which application was recently made by J. P. Riddle of Miami, and a number of associates."

Riddle built a new Carlstrom Field adjacent to the old site, and several hundred Britons learned to fly there. Two died—one of disease and the other in a mishap. All the British cadets who died while training elsewhere in southwest Florida are buried in "The British Plot," in Oak Ridge Cemetery as commemorated on the historical marker installed there by the Rotary Club in 1968.

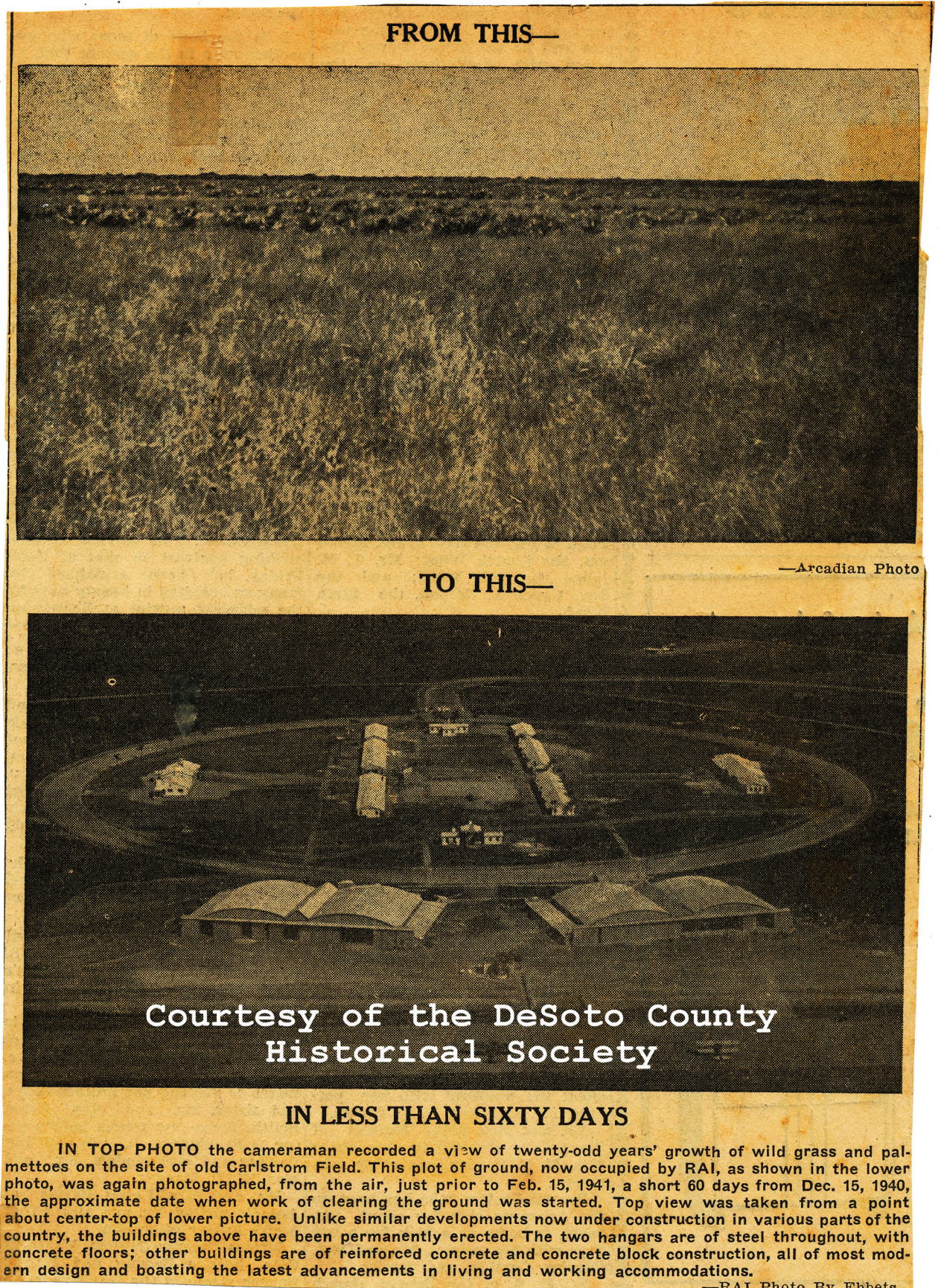
Seusy wrote that the observance will be similar to those in the past, including an invocation, raising the flags of Britain and the Royal Air Force, with traditional songs—some played on the bagpipes. In addition, he noted, "We hope that the British Car Clubs will show up with some of their amazing vehicles."

This year, Attorney David Hollomon, now retired,—who served as counsel to the City of Arcadia—will speak about "the history and development of the ceremony and the burial place for the cadets."

RIDDLE AERONAUTICAL INSTITUTE (RAI)

According Deed Book 234, William E. Dunwody and his wife Reba Dunwody, sold the land that had been Carlstrom Field to the Embry-Riddle Company, a Florida Corporation in Miami, on Jan. 9, 1941. Contractor C. F. Wheeler transformed what once was a cattle pasture to a training facility for pilots in about 60 days, starting work before the property was formally transferred.

The March 27 newspaper published an exciting headline: "Riddle Institute opens first term: class of 49 cadets began task of learning to fly Saturday." They were from the U.S. as the British cadets had not yet arrived. The article



The "Arcadian" featured "before" and "after" photographs of the new Carlstrom Field built in about 60 days in 1941. Photograph courtesy of the DeSoto County Historical Society.

continued, ". . . The Institute is to be formally dedicated Sat., April 5, and the program of exercises will be ready to present in the paper next week."

The July 3, 1941, newspaper reported: "Both American and British cadets are keenly anticipating the Rodeo shows this weekend. For many of the American boys, Arcadia will furnish them their first taste of Rodeo thrills, and practically 100 percent of the British boys will see their first 'wild west' action. Arrangements have been made for 'time off' for the rodeo and celebration and a holiday spirit is running high at RAI."

Later that month the July 24 newspaper reported, "One of the members of the last group of British Cadets, Charles F. Russell, age 21, who arrived here last Thursday morning, died at the local hospital Tuesday morning following a brief illness, said to

have been due to pneumonia. . . . British Cadets from Riddle Aeronautical Institute formed an escort of honor at the grave." This death was the impetus for the British government to purchase a plot in Oak Ridge Cemetery.



On April 5, 1941, the "Rededication Ceremony at Carlstrom Field" featured Rodeo Queen and Cowgirl Emma Marie Vance christening the field by breaking a glass bottle of orange juice on a metal stake, and "Mayor Marshall Whidden presented [Gen. Walter R. Weaver] with a cowboy hat—a symbol of the cow county and Arcadia's Rodeo," as noted in the Apr. 10 "Arcadian." Photograph courtesy of the DeSoto County Historical Society.

DORR FIELD

On March 31, the Lake Stearns Development, Inc., (LSDI) of DeSoto County sold land on State Road 70 to Embry-Riddle as recorded in Deed Book 236. William E. Dunwody served as LSDI president, and his wife Reba as secretary. LSDI had purchased the property from the Parker Brothers, so it had also been cattle range and was soon rebuilt as Dorr Field.

The Aug. 14 newspaper reported that "Arcadians will say cheerio at the end of the week to the first class of [Royal Air Force] cadets to train at Carlstrom field, and all of the home folks will be sorry to see the Britons move on

instruction building, recreation building, paint shop, pump station, bath house, gate house, and field storage building," according to Deed Book 235.

On April 18, 1942, Embry-Riddle leased "Carlstrom and Dorr Field Military Reservations, Florida, for the purpose of conducting a civil flying school for training military students," as recorded in Deed Book 237.

CLASHING CULTURES

In his book "RAF Wings Over Florida: Memories of World War II British Air Cadets," published in 2000, Willard Largent includes an appendix entitled "Watch Your Language" about different meanings for the same words on either side of the Atlantic. In addition, the British had distinct food and beverage preferences, and chafed against the "hazing

system that was part of the Army Air Corps training . . . RAF cadets took action, sometimes convincing base commanders to reduce, or, in some cases, end the old 'tradition'."

One such custom—"the practice of 'dunking' cadets in the pool, after they have first soloed" inadvertently caused a second death on Jan. 4, 1942: "Alfred P. Lloyd, age 19, a British cadet at Carlstrom Field, was the victim of an unfortunate tragedy on Monday evening when he was drowned in the swimming pool."



Courtesy of the DeSoto County Historical Society

"The Christian Advocate" published a short article about how the congregation of Trinity United Methodist Church in Arcadia welcomed the cadets. "On each Saturday afternoon and evening the recreational rooms of the church are open to the cadets, whose recreation is supervised by Mr. Lewis Ambler, Mrs. Rupert Smith, and Miss Isabelle Scott. Shuffle board, pingpong, darts, and many table games are provided for their use, and hardly a Saturday evening passes without an hour's group singing in which boys and girls participate while gathered about the piano. On Sunday morning, the free bus transports the cadets to and from the church for morning worship service. Usually the people of the church invite the boys into their homes for Sunday dinner." These photographs and notes are from a page of a scrapbook kept by Helen Scott that she dedicated "To the cadets of Carlstrom and Dorr Fields: May their memory live long in the minds and hearts of the people of Arcadia." Courtesy of the DeSoto County Historical Society.

to Gunter field, [Alabama], for further training. About 65 will be graduated.

"They are an entirely different appearing crowd that arrived here 10 weeks ago, slim, slender, with their pink and white complexions. Now they're brown, hardy and tough, proud of their American slang, and very fond of their Arcadian friends who have opened their homes to them to visit at off-hours and over week-ends.

"Next week the largest single contingent of cadets is expected arrive at Carlstrom when possibly 190 will detrain here. By that time all of the new barracks will be ready for them. In a few more weeks, Dorr field also will be ready for flight training, too, which will mean bout 350 to 400 British cadets in training in overlapping classes at both schools all of the time. . . ."

On Feb. 10, 1942, Embry-Riddle sold the Carlstrom Field property to the Defense Plant Corporation, enumerating the improvements: "10 barracks, 4 hangars, 1 administration building, mess building, control tower,



In 1968, the Arcadia Rotary Club commemorated "The British Plot" in Oak Ridge Cemetery with a historical marker. Photograph courtesy of Carol Mahler.



Presented to the City of Arcadia on April 21, 1998, this painting hangs in the Margaret Way building with the following dedication: "We, the members of No. 5 British Flying Training School Association, commissioned this original oil painting by Ron Homes, an associate of the guild of aviation artists in London, to present to the warm-hearted people of Arcadia, Florida, as a token of our respect and gratitude for their continuing devotion to the last resting places of our comrades in Arcadia's Oak Ridge Cemetery."