

# St. Petersburg Times

## Carrabelle once had a different kind of tourist:[STATE Edition]

*J.G. NASH. St. Petersburg Times. St. Petersburg, Fla.: Jun 6, 2004. pg. 7.T*

Copyright Times Publishing Co. Jun 6, 2004

Sixty years ago today, Allied forces stormed the beaches of Normandy, beginning the end of Nazi Germany's dreams of world domination. Many of the U.S forces involved received their training in amphibious operations at a 100,000-acre Army post in and around this Florida Panhandle village.

Back then, the base was known by descriptive nicknames such as "Alcatraz of the Army" and "Hell-By-The-Sea." Today, the area is a placid coastal community that faces development to take advantage of the region's tourist potential.

The place has maintained an odd symmetry in population, a half- century before and after the war. Carrabelle's population in 1893, when the area's lumber and turpentine were in great demand and sawmills lined the Carrabelle River, was about 1,550. It's about 1,300 today.

In 1942, when the Army began amphibious training at the then-new Camp Gordon Johnston, up to 30,000 people were stationed there.

The troops lived and trained under trying conditions. Bugs were everywhere, as were poisonous snakes. In the summer, the soldiers suffered from the heat; in the winter, they shivered in unheated barracks.

Much of their training consisted of jumping out of landing craft into waist-deep water while burdened with 40 pounds of equipment and then trying to run up on a beach to avoid enemy gunfire they were told would challenge them one day, somewhere.

An Army sergeant stationed at Camp Gordon Johnston wrote this doggerel:

The rattlesnake bites you, the horsefly stings  
The mosquito delights you with his buzzin' wings.  
Sand burrs cause you to jig and dance  
And those who sit down get ants in their pants.  
The heat in the summer is one hundred and ten  
Too hot for the Devil, too hot for the men.  
Come see for yourself and you can tell  
It's a helluva place, this Carrabelle.

After Gen. Omar Bradley went there in January 1943, he wrote:

"Camp Gordon Johnston was the most miserable Army installation I had seen since my days in Yuma, Arizona. The man who selected that site should have been court-martialled (sic) for stupidity."

But Bradley, along with other critics of the harsh conditions, came to admit that the base's difficulties helped toughen men for wading ashore against enemy resistance.

With the war's end, temporary installations such as Camp Gordon Johnston became unnecessary; the post was closed in March 1946. The locals went back to fishing for a living, and you could have bought a prime waterfront lot for a song.

Today a subdivision, Lanark, has sprouted across much of the military camp, of which little remains. Carrabelle still depends upon

fishing, but tourism is beginning to help the economy.

Visitors may notice that little takes place on time, and few residents seem to care.

Harry's Bar, which was there when the GIs were, opens around 7 a.m. to serve fishermen heading into the Gulf. It closes at 10 p.m. This is not a town for nightlife. Jerry Adams, who owned the bar for 17 years, made Carrabelle his home after spending 25 years with Northwest Airlines in Atlanta. He says he is especially pleased that he has been accepted as a native.

Ron Gempel, operator of the Carrabelle Junction coffee shop, which seems to be the town's unofficial meeting place, is another transplant. He came from San Francisco, but judging from his clothing and attitude, he appears to have been born in Carrabelle.

Most recreational activities involve the Gulf: fishing, diving, spending the day on almost uninhabited Dog Island. Boat charters of all types are available.

All of which makes it hard to imagine the place three generations ago, when young soldiers practiced wading ashore, some drowning in the effort.

- J. G. Nash is a freelance writer living in Homosassa.

**GETTING THERE:** The nearest airport and car rental is at Tallahassee, 50 miles northeast of Carrabelle. U.S. 98, which can be reached easily from U.S. 19 as it parallels the coast, is the town's main street.

**WHEN TO GO:** The tourism season runs from late May through early August; **prices and temperatures are lower at other times. Even in mid winter it is usually possible to stroll the beaches protected only by a thin jacket.**

**THINGS TO DO:** There are many boat charter services, most based at the Moorings; (850) 697-2800, [www.MooringsCarrabelle.com](http://www.MooringsCarrabelle.com). I used Island Charters, run by Capt. Bob McDaris, (850) 697-4101, and Capt. Ron Treutel, who was born and raised on the coast, (850) 697- 8984. Canoers and hikers can enjoy Tate's Hell State Forest, 1.5 miles northwest of Carrabelle. It has 35 miles of primitive river and a 1-mile walking trail. The park has about 185,000 acres. The area reportedly got its name in the late 1800s after a farmer named Tate entered to kill a panther he suspected of killing his livestock. Tate became lost, and days later, delirious and suffering from a water moccasin's bite, he stumbled out of the swamp and told those who found him, "My name's Tate, and I've just been through hell!"

**STAYING THERE:** Rental cottages and condos are available from agencies such as Anchor Realty; toll-free 1-800-824-0416; [www.florida-beach.com](http://www.florida-beach.com). Condos next to the city's boat basin are available from The Moorings; (850) 697-2800; [www.MooringsCarrabelle.com](http://www.MooringsCarrabelle.com). The Georgian Motel is clean, comfortable and has a swimming pool; (850) 697-3410; [www.1800motels.com](http://www.1800motels.com). The Old Carrabelle Hotel, the only B&B in this area, is a restored and updated 1880's property; [www.oldcarrabellehotel.com](http://www.oldcarrabellehotel.com), (850) 697-9010.