

Context: Palm Springs during World War II (1939-1945)



Looking west from Palm Springs Army Air Field, c. 1943. Barracks (now demolished) lined what is now Tahquitz Canyon Way. Source: *The Desert Sun*.

FINAL DRAFT – FOR CITY COUNCIL APPROVAL

City of Palm Springs

Citywide Historic Context Statement & Survey Findings

HISTORIC RESOURCES GROUP

THEME: THE WAR EFFORT IN PALM SPRINGS (1939-1945)

This theme explores the development of World War II-related military facilities in Palm Springs. The small city played a significant role in the war effort, but few war-related resources survive. The period of significance under this context begins in 1939, when what is now the Palm Springs International Airport was established as an Army Air Corps landing field in anticipation of the United States' eventual entry into the European war. Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, significant material resources and labor were dedicated to the war effort, and nearly all private construction ceased for the duration of the conflict.

The first airfield in Palm Springs was a dirt landing strip next to the Hotel El Mirador, laid out soon after the hotel opened in 1928. It was used by early aviation pioneers, and by Army and Navy cadets from March Airfield and San Diego. Fed up with the noise and dust, Prescott T. Stevens, El Mirador's owner, built a new strip and two hangars further away from the hotel to the northeast. This strip was in use until about 1934 and served the village's first commercial service from Maddux Airlines on its Los Angeles-Tijuana route, stopping in Palm Springs only upon passenger request. In the early 1930s, as air travel increased in popularity, the Chamber of Commerce leased a parcel of Section 14 land from the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians and built a third airstrip. It was located just east of downtown, bounded on the north by Alejo Road, on the east by Sunrise Way, on the south by Tahquitz Canyon Way, and on the west by Avenida Caballeros. The new airport had two runways and was served by American Airlines, Western Airlines, and the locally-owned and operated Palm Springs Airlines, which started out with one four-passenger plane and added a second in 1937. When Palm Springs incorporated in 1938 the airport was officially named the Palm Springs Municipal Airport.⁴²⁰

In 1939 the Army Corps of Engineers selected Palm Springs, protected from fog and rain by Mt. San Jacinto, as the location of an Air Corps landing field. The chosen site was east of the village on Cahuilla land, and was leased by the city and subleased to the Federal government. In early 1942, following the attack on Pearl Harbor, the airfield was taken over by the Air Transport Command and a new field with an A-frame terminal building and two runways was completed a half mile from the original site.⁴²¹ The Palm Springs Air Base's principal mission was the deployment of aircraft from U.S. manufacturing plants to training facilities and overseas combat theaters.⁴²² To disperse aircraft away from the field in case of enemy attack, circular concrete parking pads or "tie downs" and taxiways were built in the surrounding area.⁴²³ The city constructed a new road to the Air Base, an extension of Tahquitz Canyon Way, to

⁴²⁰ Ann Greer, "Flying High at PSP," *Palm Springs Life*, October 2013, <https://www.palmspringslife.com/flying-high-at-ppsp/> (accessed June 22, 2013).

⁴²¹ American Society of Civil Engineers, Los Angeles Section, *100 Years of Civil Engineering Excellence, 1913-2013* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse LLC, 2014).

⁴²² Denise Goolsby, "Palm Springs airport began as Army hub," *The Desert Sun*, June 21, 2014, <http://desert.sn/TOLzvR> (accessed June 21, 2015).

⁴²³ Coffman Associates, Inc., "History of PSP," *Palm Springs Airport Master Plan*, 1994.

replace the existing dirt roads. Pearl McCallum McManus gave the right-of-way for the road to the city and in exchange, it was named McCallum Way in honor of her father.⁴²⁴ Within six months a control tower, Command headquarters, barracks, and a base hospital had been constructed, with many of the new buildings lining either side of McCallum Way.⁴²⁵

The Air Base also served as a receiving facility for wounded troops returning from overseas. In 1942 the luxurious El Mirador Hotel was purchased by the Army and converted to the 1,600-bed Torney General Hospital, specializing in general medicine, rheumatic fever, and orthopedic surgery. An adjoining detention camp housed approximately 250 Italian prisoners of war who worked at the hospital.⁴²⁶ The camp was located on the block now occupied by Katherine Finchy Elementary School, Wellness Park, and Ruth Hardy Park.⁴²⁷ The surrounding desert also played an important role in the war effort. In March of 1942 General George S. Patton established the Desert Training Center at Camp Young, an hour east of Palm Springs at Shaver Summit (now called Chiriaco Summit), to train his army for combat in North Africa.⁴²⁸

⁴²⁴ Henderson et al., 64.

⁴²⁵ Goolsby.

⁴²⁶ Renee Brown, "Explore Palm Springs: Torney General Hospital," *Palm Springs Life*, July 2013, <http://www.palmspringslife.com/Palm-Springs-Life/Desert-Guide/July-2013/Explore-Palm-Springs-Torney-General-Hospital/> (accessed June 23, 2015).

⁴²⁷ Correspondence from Marvin Roos, March 23, 2015; confirmed by historic aerial photographs. After the war some of the camp barracks were relocated in the city; some may remain intact.

⁴²⁸ "Chiriaco Summit History," *Chiriaco Summit*, <http://chiriacosummit.com/about-us/> (accessed June 22, 2015).

THE WAR EFFORT IN PALM SPRINGS (1939-1945): ELIGIBILITY

Property Types: Commercial, civic, or institutional building; structures, sites, or objects

Property types significant under this context include commercial, civic, or institutional buildings co-opted or developed specifically to support the war effort; structures, sites, or objects developed specifically for the war effort or in response to the onset of World War II (examples may include tie downs, air raid sirens, and Quonset huts). Resources associated with this theme are rare. The Air Base was turned over to the city after the war and was converted into a new Palm Springs Municipal (now International) Airport, which has been expanded and upgraded a number of times since. Torney General Hospital was converted back into the Hotel El Mirador, and later into the Desert Regional Medical Center. It is unlikely that elements of World War II-era development remain on either property.⁴²⁹ A surviving tie down on Easmor Circle near the airport has been designated (HSPB-40) and at least seven others remain in the general vicinity.⁴³⁰ Katherine Finchy Elementary School, Wellness Park, and Ruth Hardy Park are collectively eligible for Class 2 designation as the site of the prisoner-of-war camp.

Applicable Eligibility Criteria

A building, structure, site, or object from this period may be eligible for historic designation under one or more of the following criteria:

CRITERIA	REASON
A/1/3 (Pattern of Development/Period) ⁴³¹	For a specific association with the World War II war effort in Palm Springs.
C/3/4,5 (Architecture)	As an excellent or rare example of a property type related to the war effort in Palm Springs.

Integrity Considerations

Each type of property depends on certain aspects of integrity to express its historic significance. Determining which of the aspects is most important to a particular property type requires an understanding of the property’s significance and its essential physical features. The rarity of the property type should also be considered when assessing its physical integrity. In order to be eligible for listing at

⁴²⁹ There appears to be an extant Quonset hut on the airport property.

⁴³⁰ The tie downs are visible in aerial photographs.

⁴³¹ Note that eligibility criteria are listed in the standard format National Register/California Register/Local. Note that National Register/California Register Criterion A/1 can be applied to a single event important in history, or to an overall trend or pattern of development. The City of Palm Springs local ordinance distinguishes these into separate criteria – Criterion 1 applies to properties that are associated with a singular event; Criterion 3 applies to properties that “reflect or exemplify a particular period” in history.

the federal, state, or local levels, a property must retain sufficient integrity to convey its historic significance under this theme.

CRITERIA	REQUIRED ASPECTS OF HISTORIC INTEGRITY
A/1/3 (Pattern of Development/Period)	A property that is significant for its historic association is eligible if it retains the essential physical features that made up its character or appearance during the period of its association with the important event, historical pattern, or person(s). ⁴³² A property from this period eligible under Criteria A/1/3 should retain integrity of location, feeling, and association, at a minimum, in order to reflect the important association with the war effort during World War II in Palm Springs.
C/3/4,5 (Architecture)	A property important for illustrating a particular property type, must retain most of the physical features that constitute that type. ⁴³³ A property significant under Criterion C/3/4,5 (Architecture) should retain integrity of design, workmanship, materials, and feeling.

The War Effort in Palm Springs (1939-1945): Registration Requirements

To be eligible under this theme, a property must:

- date from the period of significance; and
- have a direct association with the war effort during World War II; and
- display most of the character-defining features of the property type or style; and
- retain the essential aspects of historic integrity.

⁴³² *National Register Bulletin 15.*

⁴³³ *National Register Bulletin 15.*

