

# WWII Ties to Miami Beach

*Hendersonville resident has ties to Florida city through time spent training there during World War II.*

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Community contributor

If you walk along Ocean Drive or Lincoln Road in Miami Beach today, you will see a constant parade of young, hip residents and tourists, all determined to have fun. They are radically different from just 30 years ago when mainly elderly seniors escaping cold winters in the other regions populated the area. But it is even more difficult to envision the beach of 70 years ago, when the same streets were filled with another generation with a much more serious purpose.

Between 1942 and 1945, Miami Beach played a significant role in WWII. The city housed basic training, officer candidate training for the Army Air Corp; debriefing, evaluation and R&R for returning Army infantrymen; and

women who decoded enemy communications. Nearly half a million troops, including matinee-idol Clark Gable and movie star Robert Preston, took over more than 300 hotels and apartment buildings for housing and training headquarters by the Army Air Forces. By the time the war ended, one-fourth of all Army Air Force officers and one-fifth of the military's enlisted men had been trained in "the most beautiful boot camp in America."

In 1999 I organized the first annual "Sand in Our Boots: Miami Beach WWII Veterans Reunion." I was honored by the city as a "Woman Worth Knowing" for my role in bringing back the vets.

Since that time, I have been busy collecting memories, photos and let-

ters from the vets who passed through Miami Beach during the war years, working on a book and presenting slide show/lectures on the subject for visiting Roads Scholars (formerly Elder Hostel) groups.

I recently learned that not only had my father Dudley Berson trained on Miami Beach, but two Hendersonville residents were also stationed there. Richard Lewis, age 90, a radio personality from Atlantic City was billeted in the Alamac Hotel and Sid Prakin, age 96, was in the Evans Hotel.

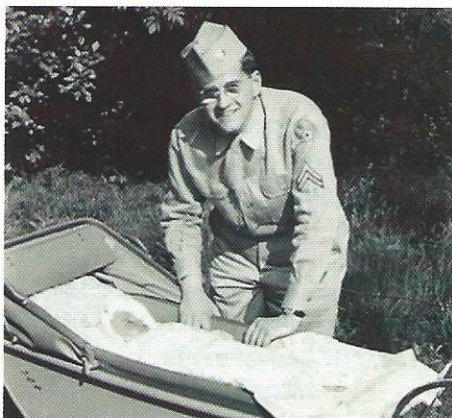
I was excited to learn that Sid's hotel was directly behind the Edison Hotel that my husband and I owned and operated. I sent Sid a copy of my book on the Edison and the Historic Art Deco District along with a draft copy of my forthcoming book, *South Beach at War: Sun, Sand and Soldiers*. I included a photo from a 1942 Life Magazine article of Army Air Corpsmen at desks in the Evans Hotel lobby. Imagine my shock when Sid told me that he was actually in the photograph.

Sid was permanent party stationed in Miami Beach from 1942 to 1943. His job was to take possession of the hotels and prepare them for occupancy by the incoming recruits.

Around June, his roommate invited him to join him for a double date. His buddy's date had a cousin who became Sid's date. They fell in love, were married in Miami Beach in January 1943 and were together for 65 years until she passed away in 2008.

World War II left an indelible imprint on South Florida and South Florida left its mark on those who passed thru during the war years. Despite the grinding training and blistering heat many of the troops who passed through Miami Beach returned after the war ended.

Some packed up and moved south immediately causing a post-war housing boom, some made Miami Beach their vacation choice and some retired in South Florida. Just as visitors get "sand in their shoes" and return again and again, many of the veterans fell in love with South Florida and got "sand in their boots."



**Top: Judi Berson-Levinson, right, stands with Hendersonville resident Sid Prakin. Bottom left: Prakin is included in this photo that ran in Life Magazine in 1942. He's in the third row on the right. Bottom right: Dudley Berson stands over his newborn daughter, Judi.**

Photos courtesy of Judi Berson-Levinson