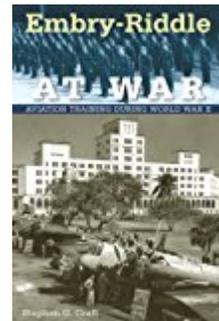




Stephen G. Craft. *Embry-Riddle at War: Aviation Training during World War II*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009. xv + 313 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-3299-3.



Reviewed by Robert A. Taylor (Florida Institute of Technology)

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Forging the Wings of Victory

The history of aviation and Florida have intertwined from the moment the first heavier-than-air machine leapt into the skies of the Sunshine State. Florida's significant number of good-weather flying days, its lack of high mountain ranges, and its geographical position make it a natural place for private, commercial, and military aviators. At no time was this more true than during the Second World War, when the Florida peninsula became an unsinkable aircraft carrier that turned out skilled pilots and flight crews for the air battles to come over Europe and the Pacific. Allied victory in the war can be, at least partially, traced back to numerous airports in Florida.

Stephen G. Craft's *Embry-Riddle At War* takes an in-depth look at how one private organization, the Embry-Riddle Company, rose to the challenge of providing quality training for future military pilots, aircraft mechanics, and aircraft assembly workers. The leader of this effort, John Paul Riddle, was an early aviation pioneer who first flew in Florida as a U.S. Army pilot. By the early 1930s, he returned to the state to found a new company in hopes of taking advantage of the aviation boom he was certain would come. The Great Depression notwithstanding,

Riddle sensed that Miami would be a great commercial flight center due, in particular, to its proximity to the Caribbean and South America.

Riddle's gamble paid off when war began yet again in Europe in 1939. Few doubted that airpower would be a decisive factor in deciding the winner of this struggle. Calls went out for expanding the tiny American air arm with thousands of new planes and the pilots to fly them. Roosevelt administration initiatives, like the Civilian Pilot Training Program, designed to supply these future air warriors, had contracts to award to aviation companies like Miami's Embry-Riddle.

The company was literally in the right place at the right time to profit from the military buildup. Riddle's tiny company, consisting of two planes and one mechanic, began growing as potential pilots for the army and the navy reported for flight training. Civilians flocked to Embry-Riddle as well to learn to fly and to gain the technical skills necessary to land high-paying work in the rapidly expanding aircraft industry. A wide variety of people washed up at Embry-Riddle's offices, including legendary "fan dancer" and pilot Sally Rand (p. 31).

By 1941, Embry-Riddle owned some twenty-six training planes and controlled a growing complex of airfields stretching from the shore of Biscayne Bay to Clewiston and Arcadia. In time, operations spread to Tennessee and as far afield as Brazil. Pearl Harbor opened the flood gates for an all-out training drive, and Embry-Riddle enjoyed a reputation as a top-notch aviation school with quality instructors and a good safety record. Soon alumni of the school would join fighting squadrons and see service in all theaters of the war.

Embry-Riddle's aviation program also enjoyed an international reputation with students from South America often taking classes. Also, the company had a longstanding agreement to train British pilots for the Royal Air Force (RAF). This effort increased after the United States entered the war, and soon south Florida towns witnessed soldiers in RAF uniforms walking their streets. These flight candidates had to grapple with Florida's heat, poor drinking water, occasional rattlesnakes in their cockpits, and "cracker" English. However, most were thrilled with the plentiful food, free-flowing orange juice, and the high quality of their training. Over twenty of these RAF men were destined to remain in Florida forever, when killed in training accidents. Riddle always believed that women had a major role to play in aviation and were just as competent at flying as men. His company practiced what he preached during the war years. Women were gladly accepted into a variety of technical training courses that rarely saw them in the past. More than a few ended up becoming certified pilots who worked ferrying warplanes from factories to forward air bases. By 1943, Embry-Riddle could boast of being the first training operation to use female instructors to train male military pilots in U.S. history.

Another group was mostly underrepresented in Embry-Riddle's flight efforts. The company did not provide flight training to African Americans. While the still-segregated American military offered limited opportunities for blacks in aviation, *Embry-Riddle At War* does not elaborate on this topic. It does not discuss why African

Americans did not seem to be accepted into such programs as civilians in order to gain skills needed to secure civilian aircraft industry employment. Blacks only worked as laborers or waitresses at Embry-Riddle installations. Craft misses an opportunity to discuss whether wartime efforts like this did, or did not, help change the racial and economic face of Florida and the rest of the nation.

By 1944, some twenty-six thousand military and civilian men and women completed one of Embry-Riddle's training programs. However, the end of the wartime boom was clearly in sight by that year. The services reported a surplus of pilots and ground crewmen. The Army Air Force, in particular, began cutting back its airmen needs. It turned out that infantrymen, not fliers, were desperately needed to win the final battles in Western Europe and on Pacific islands. By V-J Day, Embry-Riddle, despite hopes for a postwar surge in aviation, was already fading. The company, though still existing in various forms, was never really the same with the coming of peace.

In the end, the Embry-Riddle Company made a major contribution to American victory in the air during World War II. Its ability to attract government contracts and accompanying dollars helped pull Florida out of the Depression and set the stage for the great post-1945 boom. It brought thousands to Florida who might never have visited the state, and showed small towns something of the rest of the world. And finally Riddle's prophecy that Florida would become a main aviation hub and remain one after the war came true.

Craft's *Embry-Riddle at War* does a very credible job in chronicling the company during World War II and its effort to supply the personnel to "Keep 'Em Flying." Despite this, the narrative tends to drag in places where Craft discusses technical aspects of flying as well as the characteristics of different training planes. In the end, this work does make a contribution to the literature of the history of aviation, Florida, and the Second World War.

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