

Drew Field's World War II past comes alive in new Hillsborough tax collector office



Steve Contorno, Times Staff Writer

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Tax and license supervisor Davina Drayton, right, cheers as people enter the new Drew Park Tax Collection Service Center after the ribbon-cutting Monday. The center celebrates the history of Drew Field.

TAMPA — Normally, a trip to the tax collector or driver's license office isn't synonymous with soulful music or rambunctious cheering.

But Hillsborough County Tax Collector Doug Belden said his new office in Drew Park isn't a normal government building.

Not only is the office the first in the state to house both county tax collector and Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles services, it also pays homage to Drew Park's important but often overlooked role as an airfield for fighters and bombers during World War II.

Pennants, pictures, flags, equipment and other war memorabilia from Drew Field don the walls, along with paintings. Some of the memorabilia was donated. Others were on permanent loan from the University of South Florida.

The most eye-catching item was a two-thirds-scale aluminum replica P-51 Mustang fighter plane hanging from the ceiling just inside the entrance.

"This is one of the only locations in the county where you will have direct access to a fascinating part of Tampa history," Belden said.

The partnership between state and local governments will save Hillsborough taxpayers \$1.7 million in land acquisition costs and \$400,000 a year from leasing costs, Belden estimated.

He unveiled the new office at 4100 W Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., near George M. Steinbrenner Field, at a rowdy ribbon-cutting ceremony Monday morning full of singing, music and praise from local dignitaries.

"Who else can take a boring government building and do something to make it special?" county Commissioner Sandy Murman said of Belden.

Drew Field started as a private landing strip in the early 1920s built by local developer John H. Drew and cigar king Hugh C. MacFarlane. The city of Tampa later purchased the property in 1928 for Drew Field Municipal Airport, but with war on the horizon, it was soon leased by the U.S. government to supplement MacDill Army Field.

During the height of World War II, Drew Field grew to 15 square miles and housed 25,000 military and civilian personnel, according to historical research provided by the tax collector office. In addition to standard aircraft, the base also was home to anti-submarine units that searched for Nazi submarines in the Gulf of Mexico.

The field was returned to the city after the war and in 1950 became Tampa International Airport.

Contact Steve Contorno at scontorno@tampabay.com. Follow @scontorno.

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