

## Is Clay County *also* the birthplace of the Blue Angels Flight Demonstration Squadron?

During WWII, a northwest area of Middleburg was largely taken over by the United States Navy. The Navy's Branan Field Outlying Landing Field (OLF) was located there and was named after the Branan Family whose property was acquired by the military.

Following WWII, Branan Field OLF was used for the development of a new Flight Demonstration Squadron, later known as the Blue Angels. Yes - *those* Blue Angels.

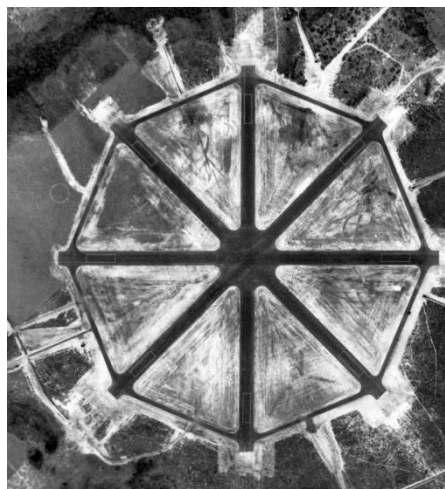
Although Naval Air Station Jacksonville is well-known as the birthplace of the Blue Angels dating back to 1946 and Naval Air Station Pensacola viewed as their current east coast home base, much of the squadron's preliminary training was also – *some would say, equally* - done at Branan Field OLF.



NAS Jacksonville Front Gate

Part of the reason why this may remain a little-known fact is because the local Blue Angel training in the 1940's was done covertly. It was wartime and

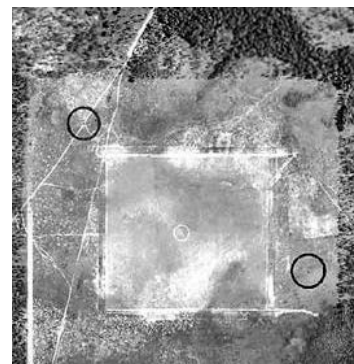
their maneuvers were conducted discretely. An Outlying Landing Field, is an auxiliary airfield, associated with a Naval Air Station, used by the United States Navy. Having no based units or aircraft and minimal facilities, an outlying landing field is used as a low-traffic location for flight training, without the risks and distractions of other traffic at a naval air station or other airport.



US Navy's Branan Field Outlying Field 1940's

This OLF's unique geometry made it particularly suitable for training Blue Angels pilots. The large symmetrical shape (an octagon or eight-sided polygon) of Branan Field OLF with its convergence of multiple 4,000-foot runways facilitated visualization by pilots approaching a single central spot from various compass points in their jet aircraft. It was perfect.

During the same time, a large cleared area approximately one mile south of Branan Field OLF was used as the Spencer Bomb Range, a practice target for mainly inert, powder-filled bombs.



Spencer Bomb Range 1940's

A 1943 U.S. Government aerial photo (courtesy of the FL DOT, via Brian Rehwinkel) showed the target consisted of a cleared rectangular section of land with a simple small circle in the middle.

World War II ended. The US Navy sold the land in 1953. Several decades later, the original OLF site is now overlapped by (underneath) new residential subdivisions that many of us drive by or through daily on Branan Field Road, Oakleaf area side streets, and the new First Coast Expressway.

Meanwhile, the mystique and world-renowned skill of the Blue Angels squadron pilot corps lives on. Their original reputation was built over the skies of Clay County and on the runways of Branan Field OLF in Middleburg, Florida.

We are proud of our connection to the Blue Angels and to our military in general.

Middleburg, like much of Clay County, remains a regularly-chosen home for many active-duty and retired military families who make northeast Florida and the Sunshine State their home.



*Blue Angels still delight crowds wherever air shows are held.*