

A Brief History of Fort Benning

Editor's Note: *The following article was adapted from an article written by MG John M. Wright Jr. that originally appeared in the September-October 1968 issue of Infantry Magazine.*

Red Georgia clay clung tenaciously to his highly polished riding boots. Over his shoulder he could see a few half-completed wooden buildings neatly lining a muddy street. Below the hill and out of his sight, the rain-swollen Upatoi Creek flooded into the lowlands. The date was 24 April 1919.

MG C.S. Farnsworth, on his first day in command of a post only seven months old, reacted to the question put to him by a Columbus newspaper reporter: "My goal is simple. It is my hope and ambition to make Fort Benning the largest and most influential Army post in the United States."

Farnsworth's goal was unbelievably optimistic considering the status of Camp Benning at the time. The War Department had already disapproved his memorandum announcing Camp Benning as a permanent post; and although he referred to the post as "fort," it was, in fact, recognized only as a temporary camp. The "war to end all wars" — World War I — was over and the citizen soldiers were returning to their homes. An economy-minded Congress was drastically opposed to continued military spending and was seriously considering the abandonment of the budding Army post near Columbus. Construction and other improvements were stalemated during the political debates. And yet, despite these conditions, Farnsworth outlined his bold plans for Fort Benning's future.

Remarkably enough, it did not take many years for Fort Benning to earn the reputation among military leaders Farnsworth predicted. As we celebrate the post's centennial, here's a look back...

Early Beginnings

Camp Benning was founded on 7 October 1918 to meet the manpower needs of GEN John J. Pershing's expeditionary forces. Fortunately for the Infantry, GEN Pershing also needed a large number of artillerymen for the same purpose. When the United States entered World War I, both the Artillery School of Fire and the Infantry School of Arms were housed at Fort Sill, OK, and training grounds there were already in short supply. In addition to wanting the whole of Fort Sill, the artillery school also desired more land for the location of a training center. Thus, both the Infantry and Artillery were jockeying for camp sites.

On 21 May 1918, the Adjutant General (AG) of the Army appointed COL Henry E. Eames, Infantry, to head a board of officers to meet at Fort Sill to select a new site for the Infantry School of Arms. The AG expressed a desire to





**A photo of Camp Benning from 9 January 1919.
(U.S. Army photos)**

consider relocating the school to either Camp Gordon, GA; Camp Pike, AR; Camp Lee, VA; or to another location central to those sites.

Columbus, GA, was central to them, but other sites also came in for consideration. Most were disqualified either because of poor climate or remoteness to population centers. Fort Wingate, NM, for example, was disqualified because of terrain. Although Eames' group considered Fort Bragg (NC), Fort Knox (KY), and Sill, artillery training needs precluded any sort of serious consideration.

The site near Columbus afforded nearly ideal conditions for Infantry training — a mild year-round climate, access to transportation, and varied terrain. COL Eames, who would become Benning's first commander, was impressed. Still, the effort of both Infantry officers and interested civilians cannot be underestimated. Although their motives may have differed slightly, their combined surge to locate Camp Benning near Columbus was considerable — the Army wanted a camp near Columbus, while the Columbus citizens had similar motives grounded in historical and patriotic roots stemming from the Civil War.

Meanwhile, MAJ J. Paul Jones was in Washington working on the plans and estimates for the relocation of the Infantry School of Arms from Fort Sill to Camp Benning. His job, once the decision had been made to locate the new camp at Columbus, was an overwhelming one: in two weeks, build a cantonment to accommodate 1,200 men. Jones' task was further compounded by instructions that troops already en route to Columbus had to be taken care of, although no money had been allotted and the whole project had not received the formal approval of the Secretary of War.

Jones started his project with frantic telephone calls from Washington, setting things in motion for construction. He arrived in Columbus on 24 September, the same day as COL Eames. While a camp site was being selected about three miles from town on Macon Road, a civilian and military committee was formed which began to marshal a labor force to accomplish the nearly impossible task of overnight construction. A monument now stands where Camp Benning was born, not only to serve as a fitting reminder of a significant birthplace, but also as a tribute to the entire city of Columbus and the magnificent effort expended in making Camp Benning ready for occupancy in the unbelievably short period of seven days.

Troops arrived on 6 October, and the camp was officially born the following day. Less than two weeks later, on 19 October, a ceremony was held to ceremoniously christen the Army post as Camp Benning, named after Confederate General Henry Lewis Benning, an outstanding lawyer-turned-soldier from Columbus. Camp Benning was a reality.

Influence

It's impossible to trace the history of Fort Benning, the post, without considering the influence of the Infantry

School. In the first place, a school for Infantry was a long sought for goal of many Army leaders, even before Camp Benning reached the drawing board.

An Infantry School of Instruction was established in 1826 in St. Louis. Unfortunately, this school was stillborn and finally abandoned in 1828.

After this, the issue of an Infantry School lay dormant for many years. Field commanders were still required to train their soldiers while in battle, and the horrible slaughter during the Civil War proved once again that lack of discipline and formal training only brought on higher casualties.

By 1907, LTG Arthur MacArthur had noted the deplorable state to which marksmanship had fallen among his own troops, and he founded the School of Musketry at the Presidio of Monterey, CA. This school was ostensibly founded to train marksmen, but something beyond this was envisioned by LTG MacArthur when he said of the school, "In the evolution of the school, the scope of the work may take a wider range and include all subjects connected with small arms, ammunition, and tactics." An Infantry School?

The school progressed markedly during its existence. It introduced such revolutionary concepts as the coach-and-pupil method of instruction, field firing which demanded a consideration of terrain, and the combining of tactics with fire. But by 1913, the War Department chose to transfer the school to a more central location of Fort Sill.

While at Fort Sill, the School of Musketry never managed to get into full sway because of Mexican border incidents. These raids upon U.S. soil necessitated the detachment of school troops to the border, and this affected the training cycle at the Sill location. These interruptions would last until our entrance into World War I.

Name

In 1917, the name of the school was changed from the School of Musketry to the Infantry School of Arms, and it was at this time that the struggle for maneuver land began with the artillery and resulted in the selection of the new camp site near Columbus.

Obviously a few acres in what is now downtown Columbus could not satisfy the space requirements of an Infantry School, so COL Eames set about selecting a more suitable site. He finally located one south of Columbus which seemed to possess the topography needed for a school. It had originally been part of the newly ceded Indian territory disposed of in the lottery of 1827 which lay between the Flint and Chattahoochee Rivers. John Woolfolk, formerly of North Carolina, drew one lot and purchased additional lots from those who preferred to live elsewhere. Later, in 1843, he purchased additional land in the same area, so that his plantation eventually comprised more than 5,000 acres. This plantation became the nucleus of modern Fort Benning.



One of the three cuartels built between 1925-1935 is shown under construction.



In addition to LTC George C. Marshall (bottom right center), the 1931 Infantry Board also included (top left to right) LTC C.A. Hunt, MAJ C.H. Hodges, MAJ S.H. MacGregor, MAJ B.R. Legge, (bottom left to right) COL George F. Baltzell, BG Campbell King, and LTC T.W. Brown. (1931 Doughboy Yearbook)

The great plantation system was almost gone following the Civil War, and the Woolfolk Plantation, like many of its counterparts throughout the South, was broken up and sold. Benjamin Hatcher, a citizen of Columbus, purchased 1,782 of its acres, including the old plantation house, in 1883. Although he continued to live in Columbus, he operated the plantation under the direction of a resident manager until 1907, when it was purchased by Arthur Bussey.

Since the Bussey Plantation satisfied his requirements, Eames sought — and obtained — War Department approval to locate the boundaries of the reservation practically as he chose. Action then began to acquire the property, including the large frame house which now serves as the home of the commanding general.

Demobilization

Then World War I ended, and most of the Army that GEN Pershing commanded was demobilized. This went well with the people and their representatives because the United States had long been suspicious of a large standing defense establishment, and the economy-minded 66th Congress turned its attention to the millions of dollars appropriated for military spending during the war emergency. The Congress particularly objected to the establishments of new posts, including Camp Benning, while other Congressional targets included Forts Bragg and Knox, although their construction was further along than that of Benning.

The League of Nations debate also seemed to threaten the new post, for half of the U.S. Senate's Committee on Military Affairs was dead set against the league and its proponents who argued that American soldiers should be the nation's enforcement arm. The Congressional Record for Friday, 13 June 1919, for example, repeatedly mentions Benning. Georgia Congressmen, mindful of the economic crunch, could not be convinced that the Army really needed another post, especially since wars were a thing of the past — for the moment, at least.

And so the debate went on. Throughout it, the Army continued to push for Camp Benning. Funds were frozen, then released. Somehow the project muddled through.

It was about this time that MG Farnsworth took over command from Eames, and his dream began materializing in 1922 when the little encampment south of Columbus was redesignated "fort." Still, Congress was in no liberal mood for full-scale development of the post.

Between the years 1925-1935, the three cuartels, now considered Fort Benning landmarks, were constructed. Other building projects were still on a stop-and-go basis.

There is little question that the highlight of the 1920s was the assignment of LTC George C. Marshall in 1927 as assistant commandant of the Infantry School. Marshall did not believe on total reliance of the "school solution"

and threw open the doors of academic thinking to personal thoughts. For example, one day in a classroom, he required each student to draw a detailed map of the route he followed to class, locating both natural and man-made features. From this simple exercise, he drove home the point that military men always had to be observant to think, think, think.

Marshall surrounded himself with people who were capable of independent thought, people like Joseph W. Stilwell and Omar N. Bradley, who would later become Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. It was the beginning of a golden era in academic instruction, an era which has continued to this day.

The 1930s brought the great depression and with it massive doses of government spending. Fort Benning came in for a lion's share through such projects as the Works Progress Administration (WPA), Public Works Administration (PWA), and Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), and Building 35 — for years the heart of Fort Benning and Infantry School — was completed in 1935.

It was during this period more than any other that Fort Benning literally “motored” into Army leadership as the true “Home of the Infantry.” The automatic weapon, the machine gun, and above all, the tank, called for a re-examination of Infantry organization, and Fort Benning was tasked with the study. The results of the Infantry School study were recorded favorably in 1936 by the Chief of Infantry, and the study itself had a tremendous impact on the reorganization of the infantry regiment, on increased mobility, and on more firepower with the creation of a weapons battalion.

World War II and Beyond

During the build up for World War II, the 2nd Armored Division under then-BG George S. Patton was activated at Fort Benning, the first of many resident divisions. It was also during the 1940s that the Infantry Officer Candidate School came into being, and that a radical new approach in moving troops to a battlefield by parachute was tested.

The Korean Conflict in the 1950s once again energized Fort Benning after the period of military demobilization that followed World War II. Probably the most lasting innovation of this period was the creation of an environment at Fort Benning for the training of a special breed of fighting man — the Army Ranger. The U.S. Army Ranger School's purpose was, and still is, to develop combat skills of selected officers and enlisted Soldiers by requiring them to perform effectively as small unit leaders in a realistic tactical environment, under mental and physical stress approaching that found in actual combat.



Fort Benning is now home to both the U.S. Army Infantry and Armor Schools. The Maneuver Center of Excellence's headquarters building is named McGinnis-Wickam Hall after SPC Ross McGinnis and CPL Jerry Wickam, Medal of Honor recipients representing the Infantry and Armor branches, respectively. (Photo by John Helms)

The 1960s literally flew in on the blades of helicopters with the formation in 1963 of the 11th Air Assault Division under MG Harry W. O. Kinnard and a galaxy of airmobile-minded young Infantrymen. Again, Fort Benning proved a bellweather in the development of battlefield techniques as this unit — which became the 1st Cavalry Division in 1965 — repeatedly proved its mettle in combat.

In 2005, the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) Commission decided to relocate the U.S. Army Armor Center and School from Fort Knox to Fort Benning. In October 2009, the Maneuver Center of Excellence (MCoE) was officially activated during a ceremony, and the Armor School completed its move south by September 2011.

Today, Fort Benning continues its tradition of excellence. The mission of the MCoE and Fort Benning is to provide trained and combat-ready Soldiers and leaders; develop doctrine and capabilities for the maneuver force; and provide a first-class quality of life for our service members, civilian, and families to ensure our Army's maneuver force is ready now and in the future.

Resources

Read more about Fort Benning's history at:

- * <http://www.benning.army.mil/library/content/Virtual/Fort%20Benning%20History/index.htm>
- * <http://www.benning.army.mil/Infantry/Historian/Historical-Documents.html>
- * <http://www.benning.army.mil/100/>