

History of Fort Leonard Wood

By Dr. Larry Roberts

The history of Fort Leonard Wood dates back to the dark days just before World War II. By 1940, war had engulfed Europe and much of Asia. The United States was slowly and painfully struggling to put its military house in order. By then, many Americans believed that it was only a matter of time before the country would be drawn into what was rapidly becoming a global conflict.

The nation's leaders worked to increase the size of the armed forces, procure modern equipment, and merge the two into an effective fighting force. One of the major challenges was finding suitable training areas for the expanding Army. In 1940, the War Department decided to establish a major training facility in the Seventh Corps area. This command comprised most of the states of the central plains. Originally located near Leon, Iowa, the site for the new training center was moved to south-central Missouri.

On 3 December 1940, military and state officials broke ground for what was known as the Seventh Corps Area Training Center. In early January 1941, the War Department designated the installation as Fort Leonard Wood.

General Leonard Wood

The post is named for Major General Leonard Wood, a distinguished American Soldier whose service to his country spanned 40 years. A warrior and a surgeon, Wood graduated from Harvard University and began his military service as a contract surgeon during the Apache Indian Wars in the 1880s, winning the Congressional Medal of Honor for valor.

At the outbreak of the Spanish-American War, Wood commanded the 1st U.S. Volunteer Cavalry, better known as the Rough Riders. His second in command, Theodore Roosevelt, took over the regiment when Wood was promoted. Roosevelt earned fame for leading the Rough Riders in the charge on San Juan Hill.

Wood served as the Army's Chief of Staff from 1910 to 1914. His last position of service was as Governor General of the Philippine Islands, which Spain had ceded to the United States after the Spanish-American War. Wood held this position until his death in 1927.



Major General Leonard Wood



Soldiers build a bridge to the Fort Leonard Wood golf course – 1 February 1957

Building the Fort

Building a major training center in the rugged terrain of the Ozarks presented a formidable challenge. The nearest rail service was several miles away. There was no housing for the thousands of workers who would build the post. Fort Leonard Wood had to be built quickly, since the first troops were scheduled to arrive in only a matter of weeks after the initial groundbreaking. First to train at Fort Leonard Wood were elements of the 6th Infantry Division.

Inclement weather complicated construction; bulldozers often were needed to drag lumber trucks through the mud. But through sheer determination and hard work, construction crews completed their task by June 1941. They had built nearly 1,600 buildings, comprising more than five million square feet of floor space, at a cost of \$37 million—and had done the job in six months.

Original Training Mission

Fort Leonard Wood was to be the home of the 6th Infantry Division. In time, four other infantry divisions—the 8th, the 70th, the 75th, and the 97th—trained at the installation. In addition, a number of nondivisional units, ranging from field artillery battalions to quartermaster companies, also trained on the post. During World War II, more than 300,000 Soldiers passed through Fort Leonard Wood on their way to service in every theater of operation.

While the post was initially designated as an infantry division training area, Fort Leonard Wood quickly took on

an engineer training mission. In March 1941, the first elements of an Engineer Replacement Training Center arrived in south-central Missouri. The growing size of the engineer force and limited training facilities at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, prompted the Chief of Engineers to look for additional training locations. Initially, engineer training focused on the training of individual replacements for established units. Soldiers went through a program that included both basic and engineer Soldier skills. The training schedule varied from 8 to 14 weeks, depending on the need for engineer replacements. In time, engineer units were formed on the post and completed their training prior to movement overseas.

Post-World War II

With the end of the war in 1945, training declined at Fort Leonard Wood and ceased completely in the spring of 1946. The War Department placed the post on the inactive list. Between 1946 and 1950, a small caretaker unit maintained some of the facilities, which were used for summer training by National Guard units. Much of the reservation was leased to an Oklahoma rancher who used the area for grazing cattle.

Korean War

In June 1950, North Korea invaded South Korea. The United States, as a major part of the United Nations mission, went into action to halt and turn back the North Korean aggression. The Department of the Army once again needed training areas. On 1 August 1950, the Army announced that Fort Leonard Wood was to be

reopened to provide basic and engineer training for Soldiers destined for Korea.

The Army reactivated the 6th Armored Division and gave the division the training mission as the cadre unit. The commander of the 6th Armored Division was Major General Samuel Sturgis, a distinguished engineer who had served under General Douglas MacArthur in the Pacific during World War II. Sturgis would ultimately become the Chief of Engineers.

Cold War

When hostilities ended in Korea, there was some concern over the fate of the post. However, the military demands of the Cold War and aggressive efforts by local community leaders led to a decision by the Army to make Fort Leonard Wood a permanent installation.

In 1956, the installation was designated the United States Army Training Center-Engineer. Because of its new status as a permanent post, Fort Leonard Wood received substantial funds to replace the wooden construction of World War II-era buildings with permanent brick structures. Construction included major troop barracks complexes, hundreds of military family units, and support and recreational facilities. The construction of the 1950s and 1960s enabled the post to handle the significant increase in training workload brought on by the war in Vietnam.

Vietnam

In 1967, the post trained more than 120,000 Soldiers. Not all of this training involved either basic or engineer training. Skill training included such specialties as clerks, cooks, bakers, wiremen, mechanics, and motor vehicle operators.

With the reduction of the Army following the Vietnam War, the overall number of Soldiers training at the post declined. However, the composition of Soldiers arriving for engineer training changed in the 1970s and early 1980s. By the mid-1970s, the United States Air Force and United States Marine Corps began training their construction equipment operators at Fort Leonard Wood. The post also began providing engineer training to other nations. In 1982, the 4th Training Brigade was training engineers from 15 foreign countries.

Engineer School

In 1985, Fort Leonard Wood entered yet another phase in its history. That year, the Secretary of the Army announced that the United States Army Engineer School would move from Fort Belvoir, Virginia, to Fort Leonard Wood. For years, the Engineer School had suffered a lack of space for training. Actually, the Army had looked at moving the Engineer School in the mid-1970s, but was unable to get the plan approved for nearly ten years. The Engineer School completed its move in 1989, occupying a new

\$60 million state-of-the-art training and education facility. For the first time in nearly 50 years, all engineer training—including officers, warrant officers, noncommissioned officers, and enlisted personnel—would take place at the same location. The growth of the post brought even more construction, with new commissary, fitness, and training facilities.

Post-Cold War

The end of the Cold War did not result in a decline in activity at the post. The invasion of Kuwait by Iraq prompted a significant military response by the United States and its allies. Fort Leonard Wood units were deployed to Southwest Asia for Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm.

In addition, the installation processed more than 4,000 Reserve Component Soldiers mobilized in response to the Iraqi invasion. This included 16 United States Army Reserve and 9 Army National Guard units. Fort Leonard Wood also provided personnel and technical expertise to contingency and humanitarian operations in Somalia, Haiti, and Bosnia. Post-Cold War training also included instruction in engineer construction techniques for Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps personnel stationed at Fort Leonard Wood.

Military Police and Chemical Schools

As a result of the 1995 Base Realignment and Closure decision to close Fort McClellan, Alabama, the United States Army Military Police School and United States Army Chemical School (recently renamed the Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear [CBRN] School) were directed to relocate to Fort Leonard Wood. In preparation for their relocation, a three-story general instruction facility was built that connected to the existing Engineer School building and contained state-of-the-art technology, support facilities, and administrative offices for both schools. Additional construction to support the Military Police and Chemical Schools included an addition to the existing Engineer Museum as well as specialized training facilities. In 1999, the Military Police and Chemical Schools joined the Engineer School to form the Maneuver Support Center of Excellence.

War on Terrorism

With the attack on the United States on 11 September 2001, the nation entered into a struggle against global terrorism. Fort Leonard Wood has intensified its efforts to defeat this new threat. This includes revising doctrine and tactics to meet an asymmetrical threat and building or improving equipment to support forces. The installation trains and supports units from both the Active Army and Reserve Components, many of which deploy in support of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom.



Dr. Roberts is the historian at the United States Army Engineer School, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri.