



WARRIOR IN TRANSITION COMPLEX: GROWING IN PHASES

By Mr. Christopher P. Gardner

The United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) New York District recently completed construction of barracks and adjoining administrative facilities for the 385th Infantry Battalion at Fort Drum, but the job was different from other barracks projects that are springing up as the installation continues to grow. The 385th is one of the Army's Warrior in Transition (WIT) units—a relatively new concept for the Army. The units are made up of wounded Soldiers and are geared toward helping them make the transition back to traditional Army units or into civilian lives.

The 144-Soldier barracks is only one part of the new \$35.7 million WIT Complex, a phased project that is capable of expanding to seven facilities. The complex also includes a new company operations facility, where medical

and personal services are available and where WIT commanders can manage their Soldiers' intricate and often long transition processes in one place. Connected to the Soldiers' housing, the facility serves as a kind of nerve center for their healing. After the contract for the WIT complex was awarded in July 2008, Phase I of the project was completed 18 months later, in mid-February 2010, and the Soldiers moved into the barracks on 10 April 2010.

The 385th's Alpha Company has approximately 125 Soldiers, and their company commander notes that having everyone connected under one roof is a significant improvement. Many of the Soldiers, whether having suffered physical or psychological wounds—or both—have a litany of doctor and physical therapy appointments, counseling sessions, and other meetings required to prepare them



Photo by Dan Desmet, New York District public affairs

for the next steps in their lives. Many of these resources used to be spread all over the installation or even farther away. Now, case managers, nurses, social workers, counselors, and Army leadership are within walking distance of the housing—and Fort Drum’s Guthrie Ambulatory Health Care Facility is across the street from the complex. A Purple Heart recipient who was injured in an improvised explosive device (IED) blast in Afghanistan, and who recently moved into the WIT barracks, stated that the improved access obviates the need to drive Soldiers who can’t get around to their appointments. Additionally, having the Army leadership nearby is “a lot easier.”

Just as the facility offers Soldiers many services to help them with their healing and transition back toward more traditional units—since the ultimate goal is to return Soldiers to duty—there are also resources for transitioning back into the civilian world. These resources can include helping Soldiers with career services, exploring educational opportunities, and determining what kinds of support Soldiers will need after they leave the Army. At the adjoining administrative building in the complex, education counselors guide those looking for colleges—such as one Soldier in the 385th who was injured while training for deployment and now wants to become a police officer.

The WIT barracks building appears similar to others from the outside, but on the inside the rooms are designed to be more comfortable for the transitioning Soldiers as they heal. The living quarters and kitchenette areas are larger and offer the Soldiers more privacy than in traditional barracks facilities. The size is comparable to a small apartment, with a personal side and doors to each room. The rooms offer more than comfort though, as they are not quite uniform throughout the barracks, and certain rooms are Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)-compatible: They have unique features like adjustable-height stoves and countertops and/or specialized bathroom facilities that



Photo by Dan Desmet, New York District public affairs

A sheltered walkway connects the Warrior in Transition barracks to important services, such as counseling and command leadership.

can be especially helpful for Soldiers with physical injuries. Here, a Soldier can be assigned the best room for his or her unique situation.

The three-story barracks is also equipped with elevators—including special oversize ones—and “areas of rescue,” which are designated spots near exits where people with disabilities can remain temporarily in safety during emergency situations while awaiting further instruction. Neither the larger elevators nor the areas of rescue are standard for an Army barracks.



The Warrior in Transition Complex at Fort Drum, New York, located next to the Guthrie Ambulatory Health Care Facility, is composed of special barracks facilities for wounded warriors and adjoins the Company Operations Facility.



This geothermal system is inside the barracks in the new Warrior in Transition Complex at Fort Drum, New York.

The WIT Complex at Fort Drum was one of the first of its kind in the Army to open up to Soldiers; presently, the only other completed facility like it is at Fort Riley, Kansas. There are WIT units elsewhere throughout the Army, and other installations are already regarding the Fort Drum facility as an example. The USACE Center of Standardization is proud of how well the facilities turned out and recently brought two WIT unit company commanders from Fort Belvoir, Virginia, to visit the Fort Drum complex—with personnel from the USACE Baltimore District and an architect from the next WIT facility at Fort Belvoir—to learn what went into its planning, design, and construction.

The WIT Complex Phase I project is completely finished, but the complex is slated to continue growing immediately as part of WIT Phase II, which consists of a battalion headquarters facility, a Soldier and family care facility, and 48 additional rooms for Soldiers. During the next few years, there are also plans for additional housing, administrative facilities, a clinic, and a potential dining facility. The way the WIT Complex is designed to grow in phases—with structural additions having minimal effects on current occupants and the site—will benefit Soldiers, minimize impact to the environment, and provide savings to the government.



Mr. Gardner is a public affairs specialist with the United States Army Corps of Engineers. He currently serves with the New York District, based in New York City. He holds a bachelor's in mass communication from the University of South Florida in Tampa.