

The History of FORT KNOX

By Gary Kempf

Fort Knox, the Home of the Armor and Cavalry - has served as a U.S. military reservation since 1918. During this time it has played a key role in the development of military tactics, doctrine and equipment, and has been an integral part of the training establishment for both the active Army and Reserve Components.

Kentucky, the Fort Knox area in particular, had long been a hunting ground for the Indians. Here the various tribes also came in parties to wage war against each other. This area was never a permanent home to any of the numerous tribes. To the south were the Cherokees, the Chickasaws, and the Creeks; to the north and northwest lived the Shawnees, Miamis, and the Wyandots; to the northeast were the Iroquois and others.

It appears the Indians came because of the tremendous abundance of game. The great salt licks, in particular those near and around present day Shepherdsville, at one time attracted buffalo by the thousands. The buffalo roads were well worn and served as routes for the Indians as well as for the early White settlers into Kentucky. It was as if the Indians regarded this area of Kentucky, with the Ohio, Salt, and Rolling Fork Rivers and the great salt licks with the accompanying abundance of game and fish, as a huge cornucopia open to all but reserved for no one tribe in particular.

McClure (1979), Briggs (1955), Collins (1882), Haycraft (1869/1921), and Ridenour (1929) give excellent accounts of the lives and times of the early settlers of the area. These accounts are available in the excellent History Reference Sections of the Hardin, Bullitt, and Meade County libraries, all of which are well worth a visit. The Barr Memorial Library on Fort Knox has these references as well as many others.

The fort's history involves not only the military reservation but also the surrounding area. The land which today makes up Fort Knox was originally part of three Kentucky counties: Hardin, Meade and Bullitt.

Hardin County was created from a portion of Nelson County in November 1792. It was the fifteenth county formed in the State and was named for Colonel John Hardin, a notable pioneer and Indian fighter. The Hardin County Seat is Elizabethtown. In 1918 one-twelfth of Hardin County was transferred to the U.S. Government to establish Camp Knox. Hardin is the State's fourth largest county. 61,000 acres are now occupied by Fort Knox.

Bullitt County was formed in 1796 from parts of Jefferson and Nelson Counties. It was the twentieth county formed in Kentucky and was named for Captain Thomas Bullitt. Shepherdsville, founded in 1793, is the County Seat. Some 35,000 acres of Bullitt County are occupied by Fort Knox.

Meade County was the seventy-sixth county formed. It was formed from parts of Breckinridge and Hardin Counties in 1823. Meade County was named in honor of Captain James Meade of Woodford County who fought in the battle of Tippecanoe and was killed at the battle of River Raisen in 1813. The County Seat is Brandenburg. Fort Knox occupies 15,000 acres in Meade County.

American soldiers occupied the Fort Knox area as early as the Civil War. In 1862, the 9th Michigan Infantry constructed fortifications and bridges north of the present reservation boundaries. Fort Hill, overlooking the town of West Point, was the site of one of these positions. Units of both the Union and Confederate Armies operated in this area during the Civil War. Union troops under the command of General Don Carlos Buell and General William Tecumseh Sherman occupied the hills overlooking the Ohio River. The brilliant Confederate cavalry leader from Lexington, John Hunt Morgan, raided the area with the 2nd Kentucky Cavalry in 1862, capturing several hundred federal troops. At present day Brandenburg in Meade County, west of Fort Knox, Morgan crossed his troops over the Ohio River for his famous raid into Indiana and Ohio.

The government had considered this area as a site for a military post as early as 1903. The Army, that same year, held large-scale maneuvers in the area, particularly in and around the small agricultural villages of Stithton and West Point. The headquarters for this maneuver area was called Camp Young. What was once the center of Stithton is today the area around the traffic circle on Chaffee Avenue. Despite this early interest in the area, it was not until the United States entered World War I that the government acted. Congress initially leased 10,000 acres in the vicinity of Stithton and, in January 1918, established Camp Henry Knox as a field artillery training center. The camp was named for Major General Henry Knox, Chief of Artillery for the Continental Army during the American Revolution and later the nation's first Secretary of War.

On June 25, 1918, Congress allocated \$1.6 million to purchase 40,000 acres. Construction of the camp facilities began in July 1918, but was subsequently curtailed, first by the armistice in November 1918, then by the Army strength reductions in 1921-1922. The post was closed as a permanent installation in 1922, but continued to serve until 1932 as a training center for the 5th Corps area, for Reserve Officer training, Citizen's Military Training Camps and for the National Guard. In 1925, the post received the designation "Camp Henry Knox National Forest", which it kept until 1928, when two Infantry companies were assigned to the post.

In 1918, in the midst of its vast buildup in France, the American Expeditionary Force established a Tank Corps to support it in battle against the

German trench lines. In the beginning, the American tankers used British and French armored vehicles and took their tactics from the British, the pioneers of tank warfare. One of the first American soldiers to distinguish himself in this revolutionary form of warfare was a 33-year-old Captain of cavalry named George S. Patton, Jr.

Patton commanded the first American armored forces to see combat. Following the armistice, however, the Tank Corps fell victim to more traditional elements of the Army and, in 1920, lost its status as a separate organization, transferring all armored vehicles to the Infantry.

The British Army, which had introduced tank warfare to the world at the Battle of Cambrai in 1916, continued to develop and employ mechanized forces following World War I (WWI). The British commitment to armored warfare spurred the U.S. Army to develop and employ mechanized forces following WWI. At this time in the late 1920's, the U.S. Army's "Mechanized forces" consisted of several battalions of infantry support tanks and some separate armored car companies.

In 1929, the War Department decided to create a mechanized force, and the government allocated funds for it. The War Department centralized the mechanization process into the two combat arms it thought could best exploit armor capabilities - cavalry and infantry. The Cavalry Branch also received the specific mission of developing the mechanized force. Lieutenant Colonel Adna R. Chaffee Jr. was directed to develop the armored concept and conduct the initial maneuvers, and Colonel Daniel Van Voorhis was selected as the first commander of the Mechanized Force.

The Mechanized Force was first assembled at Fort Eustis, Virginia, in the fall of 1930. It was organized as a combined arms force which included armored cars, truck-drawn artillery, engineers, anti-aircraft artillery and infantry tanks. The tank company assigned to the force, Company A, 1st Tank Regiment, is today Company A, 1st Battalion, 66th Armored Regiment. It is the oldest tank unit in the U.S. Army.

During the force's operations at Fort Eustis, Chaffee and Van Voorhis determined that the area lacked the necessary maneuver terrain. Both felt that Camp Knox's larger size and varied terrain were more suitable for the development of the Mechanized Force. The existing force was disbanded in October 1931, and its head-quarters and several of its units were moved here to form the cadre for a mechanized cavalry regiment. The first elements of the force arrived in November 1931.

Congress designated Camp Knox as a permanent garrison on January 1, 1932, and changed the name to Fort Knox. January 16, 1933 brought the 1st Cavalry Regiment, the oldest mounted regiment in the U.S. Army, to its new home where it would trade its horses, oats and hay for combat cars, gasoline and

lubricating oil. The new 1st Cavalry Regiment (Mechanized) was joined in 1936 by the 13th Cavalry Regiment, which in turn traded its horses for tanks. Together they comprised the 7th Cavalry Brigade (Mechanized).

The pace of activity at Fort Knox picked up quickly in the late 1930's. The post served as the center for cavalry mechanization and developed much of the tactics and doctrine which the Armored Force would use upon establishment.

Also, in 1936, the U.S. Treasury Department began construction of what is now another enduring symbol of Fort Knox, the U.S. Bullion Depository. The Gold Vault was first opened in January 1937, and was just receiving its first shipments of the nation's gold reserves when the 7th Cavalry Brigade (Mechanized) rode to the aid of the beleaguered city of Louisville, struck by a major flood on the Ohio River. Fort Knox troops patrolled the city and established several refugee centers for Louisville residents and for residents of several other flooded communities along the Ohio River between Louisville and the post.

The emerging threat of Hitler's Germany in the late 1930's caused the Army to reevaluate its mechanized warfare concepts. When the German Army exploded into Poland in September 1939, and into France and the Low Countries in May 1940, it heralded the birth of a new kind of combat-blitzkrieg, or Lightning War-spearheaded by the German Panzer (Armored) Divisions. These divisions were strong, agile combined-arms formations with tanks, mechanized infantry and artillery supporting one another on the battlefield. The successes of the Panzer divisions, among other things, forced the Army to rethink its parallel but still separate development of mechanized cavalry and infantry tanks. In 1940, the 7th Cavalry Brigade (Mechanized) took part in a series of maneuvers in Georgia and Louisiana. This was followed by several meetings, at which such officers as Chaffee, Patton and Van Voorhis determined that American armor must develop as a unified concept, separate from both cavalry and infantry.

The Armored Force was born on July 10, 1940, with the Headquarters, I Armored Corps established at Fort Knox. On July 15, 1940, the 7th Cavalry Brigade (Mechanized) became the 1st Armored Division; the 6th Provisional Tank Brigade, and infantry tank unit at Fort Benning, became the 2nd Armored Division. The 70th Tank Battalion was established at Fort Meade, Maryland, and an Armored Force Board (later the U.S. Army Armor and Engineer Board), and a small Armored Force School were also established at Fort Knox.

From these beginnings, the Armored Force grew to include 16 armored divisions and over 100 separate tank battalions and mechanized cavalry squadrons by the end of World War II.

The I Armored Corps, under Patton, led the American invasion of French Morocco in November 1942; both the 1st and 2nd Armored Division also fought in North Africa, the 1st in Algeria and Tunisia, and the 2nd in Morocco. The 1st

Armored Division went on to win fame with the 5th Army in Italy, participating in the battles around Cassino, Anzio, and in the Po Valley. It led the liberation of Rome on June 4, 1944.

The 2nd Armored Division fought in Sicily in 1943, then on June 9, 1944, was the first American armored division to land in France. The division fought in all of the campaigns in north western Europe, becoming the first U.S. unit to reach the Elbe River and first U.S. unit to enter Berlin.

The Armored Force School and the Armored Force Replacement Center were officially established at Fort Knox on December 1, 1940. The school trained armored force soldiers in military fundamentals and in specific areas such as tank gunnery, armor tactics, communications and maintenance. As the armored force grew and the U.S. entered World War II, the school expanded proportionately. From an initial cadre of 155 officers and 1,458 enlisted men in October 1940, the school grew to more than 700 officers and 3,500 enlisted men by May 1943. The school alone used more than 500 buildings, many of them "temporary" wooden structures built to meet the expansion of the post. Many of these "temporary" buildings are still in use today!

The Armored Force School, at the peak of its operation during the war, operated on two daily shifts to satisfy the demand for qualified armor soldiers. The training reflected the rapid evolution of armored warfare doctrine, which changed constantly in the face of battle experience and in the alterations to the force structure and its tables of organization and equipment. Some of the buildings used by the school reflected these new doctrines and techniques. Building 1538, just off First Avenue (now Eisenhower Avenue), was built in the shape of a Landing Ship Tank (LST) to train soldiers how to load and unload armored vehicles for transport at sea. The building still stands today and is used by the Patton Museum for storing historical armored vehicles. By 1943, Fort Knox had expanded to 106,861 acres and had 3,820 buildings, compared to 864 buildings in 1940.

The original land purchase for Fort Knox, around 1918, involved approximately 477 separate parcels ranging in size from less than ¼ acre to several hundred acres. Included in these purchases were towns, homes, farms, schools, churches, train depots, businesses, cemeteries, roads, and bridges.

In the early 1940's, expansion of Fort Knox resulted in the purchase of over 1200 additional parcels of land ranging from a fraction of an acre to hundreds of acres in size.

During World War II the U.S. Bullion Depository continued to operate at Fort Knox, receiving more and more shipments of the country's gold reserves. The Gold Vault was also used to store and to safeguard the English Crown Jewels, the Magna Carta, and the gold reserves of several of the countries of occupied Europe. On December 36, 1941, the Gold Vault also received the

original documents of the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the Declaration of Independence for safekeeping. These historic documents left Fort Knox on October 1, 1944 and were returned to Washington, D.C. for public display.

Fort Knox also sees nearly 400,000 visitors annually at the showcase of the armor force and Fort Knox history: the Patton Museum of Cavalry and Armor.