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## Camp Forrest: World War II-era memories

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Few remnants remain of what was once one of the largest training bases during World War II, Camp Forrest.

Along old road beds that crisscross some 10 square miles, there are crumbling chimneys and foundations of what were once barracks and other buildings now overtaken by vegetation. These “left-overs” stand as reminders of the area’s rich military past to passers-by traveling along Wattendorf Highway.

Camp Forrest was built on land previously utilized in 1926 as a Tennessee National Guard camp, known as Camp Peay. It was built on land thought to be worthless, at a time when Wattendorf Highway was known as the Peay Highway. Both the camp and highway were named after Gov. Austin Peay.

Construction of Camp Forrest facilities began in earnest in 1940, with the first troops in residence by March 1941. Covering 85,000 acres, Camp Forrest was used as an induction center, where soldiers were trained in the basics of artillery.

The first troops to move in the camp were 1,000 men of the Tennessee National Guard 181st Field Artillery Regiment.

Plans were made for 20,000 troops to be trained at Camp Forrest; however, revisions were continually being made. Between September 1942 and March 1944, there were never less than 70,000 troops stationed in and around the area.

Camp Forrest possessed an Army Service Forces baker and cook school, a medical depot company and two Women Air Corps detachments. Camp Forrest was an active community, possessing a full-service hospital, three clubs with



Structures like these are just memories today on the grounds of what was the Army’s Camp Forrest. Originally an induction center, the base became a POW camp in May 1942. (File photo)

cafeterias, dance facilities, library, sports arena, post office, chapel, movie theaters, Red Cross, post exchange, administrative offices, warehouses, ordnance shops, barracks and a variety of recreational facilities. Available transportation included bus and taxicab services.

On May 12, 1942, Camp Forrest officially became a prisoner of war camp. All totaled, more than 22,000 Italian, German and Japanese prisoners were received during the war. At the camp, the prisoners worked in the general hospital, the bakery, kitchens and automotive shops and assisted with local agriculture crops.

But, by 1946, the war was over and Camp Forrest was no longer needed. It was declared surplus property. Water and sewage systems and electrical systems were sold as salvage. Buildings were sold at auction, torn down and carted away, leaving few physical reminders of the camp.

Records of Camp Forrest, too, are scarce. In 1973, most of the camp’s records were destroyed in a fire at the National Personnel Center in St. Louis. Only about 500 pages of correspondence were salvaged.

AEDC Historian David Hiebert said a lot of research has been conducted over the years to regain what was lost, which will help to preserve the history and legacy of Camp Forrest.

“Camp Forrest truly represents what a nation thrust into war was able to do so well and in such a relatively short time,”

he said. “It was true historical irony, because Camp Forrest took a rural Tennessee community and turned it into a very national camp with soldiers from all over the country.”

Those who spent time at Camp Forrest don’t need records or structures to recall their days at the training site. Many World War II veterans, like Robert Allen, stop at the Camp Forrest Memorial to reminisce about their days at the camp.

During the war, Allen was a 19-year old corporal who served as a line corporal with the 831st engineering aviation battalion for the 8th Air Force in England. Later, he helped construct bases and remove unexploded ordnances with the 9th Air Force in Germany.

Toward the end of the war, he received instructions to report to Camp Forrest.

“The Army sent me to Camp Forrest to serve out the three months,” Allen said. “It was used at that time to house ... POWs.

“My job was to man a machine gun post in a tower there, guarding the base’s perimeter from prisoners trying to escape. That was ironic because I had to forgo any liberty passes to get out of the military in such a short time, but the German POWs had girlfriends in town, some [POWs] even had [paying] jobs.”

Yet, as time passes, unfortunately, so do the first-hand accounts. But, thanks to the initiative of members of the Junior Force Council, glimpses into what life was like at the camp are still possible.

In 2009, Tracy Carter, council sec-

retary, spearheaded a cultural walk for center employees that focused on Camp Forrest and the history of the area today known as Arnold Air Force Base.

“I had always wondered what those concrete foundations and chimneys were left from along Wattendorf,” she recalled. “My background before coming to Arnold was working in environmental at Grand Forks AFB. I had worked with the natural/cultural resources manager on Earth Week and was aware of the Air Force Instruction requirement to educate the base populace on the culturally significant aspects of the installation.”

Carter took her idea to the base’s cultural resource manager and the result was a walking tour and presentation led by Hiebert and ATA Archeologist Shawn Chapman.

Those who attended the event learned about the layout of Camp Forrest and an overview of its history which included selections from old letters written by locals



and Camp Forrest soldiers who had shared their memories and experiences.

Today, a solitary guard tower and a former “brig” are the only intact structures that remain of the former Army training camp

which is now a part of AEDC.

Like Camp Peay before it, Camp Forrest serves as the origin of this area’s contribution to and support of the nation’s military endeavors.