

Fort Monmouth: The US Army's House of Magic**Melissa Ziobro****Brookline Books, 2024****240 pages****ISBN: 978-1955041225****DOI: [10.14713/njs.v11i2.385](https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v11i2.385)**

Melissa Ziobro's *Fort Monmouth: The US Army's House of Magic* charts the transformation of a New Jersey military installation from a World War I training ground into America's premier center for military communications and electronics research, earning its fanciful nickname through decades of technological breakthroughs that helped win wars and shape the modern world. The author uses her experience as the Command Historian for the Army's Communications-Electronics Command (CECOM) and her extensive knowledge of the fort's history to tell a series of stories, organized roughly chronologically and centered around Fort Monmouth as a location where some of the most significant technological advancements of the twentieth century were developed and a place beloved by those who lived and worked there. Through oral histories and extensive archival research, Ziobro tells the story of the fort's origins, evolution, and eventual closing with heart, humor, and an accessible tone that renders the book interesting and useful for a wide variety of audiences.

For those interested in the history of Monmouth County and the state of New Jersey, Ziobro's book has plenty to offer. The first chapter traces the history of the land on which Fort Monmouth would eventually be established, examining how the region became a summer destination for wealthy industrialists during the Gilded Age. In 1870, the racetrack at Monmouth Park opened for business, and quickly became one of the nation's leading destinations for horse racing. Eventually the park, which had earned a reputation for corruption and crime, ran afoul of a "moralist movement" that resulted in the state of New Jersey outlawing gambling in 1894. The

racetrack, hotel, and the land were abandoned and remained so until 1917 when the United States mobilized for entrance into the Great War. The Army purchased the land and established Camp Little Silver (later changed to Camp Alfred Vail) as a training headquarters for the Signal Corps. The camp revitalized the regional economy, bringing jobs, foot traffic, and an influx of capital into local businesses. The economic impact of the Army's presence in the region would continue throughout the entire history of the Fort's existence from 1917 to 2011. The Army's extended presence would also have more intangible social and cultural effects on the local community. As Ziobro put it, when the base closed in 2011 there would be "no more uniformed soldiers from the base visiting classrooms, Veterans Day and Memorial Day events, and the like. No more open houses welcoming the communities on post to see equipment and demonstrations. No more romances between the soldiers and the locals" (170).

The book also contributes to the larger history of the American military's evolution over the course of the twentieth century. The massive scale of modern warfare, beginning with the First World War, required both a continual expansion of the nation's military forces and the increasing incorporation of technology into the military's efforts. The history of Fort Monmouth exemplifies both of these trends. Although the camp was meant to be a temporary part of America's mobilization for war in 1917, its success in producing well-trained members of the Signal Corps and the output of its laboratories meant that the Army's presence would remain, first in the form of the Signal Corps School and then as a permanent base. When the United States began to gear up for the Second World War in the late 1930s and early 1940s, Fort Monmouth mobilized and expanded as well. The Fort continued to play a key role in the growth of the American military during conflicts of the Cold War like Korea and Vietnam. The work done at Fort Monmouth provided support during the Gulf War of the 1990s and the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan

following 9/11. Ziobro also explores in depth the impact of Fort Monmouth's closure in 2011, providing a behind-the-scenes look at what happens when a long-standing military installation is ordered to close and relocate its operations elsewhere. Her aim in Chapter 10 is to "memorialize the human impacts of BRAC [Base Realignment and Closure] at Fort Monmouth and the herculean efforts of the employees of the post to execute an unpopular decision to the best of their ability with no playbook" (161). It is here where her reliance on oral histories to present the story of the fort's closure particularly shines, providing a valuable resource for future military historians looking to examine the human impact of modern military restructuring.

Finally, historians of science and technology will find the book both useful and supportive of the larger history of the military-industrial complex's development. During World War I, the Army began to decrease its reliance on private corporations and instead created its own laboratories at Fort Monmouth to conduct research and development. In the short time the United States was involved in the war, the in-house researchers at Fort Monmouth conducted experiments in air-to-ground radios, aerial photography, and vacuum tubes. This research would continue and expand after the war, resulting in advances in meteorological equipment, handheld radios, and aircraft detection systems (an early form of radar). One of the devices developed at Fort Monmouth detected the approach of Japanese aircraft on the morning of December 7, 1941, prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor. After World War II, innovation in radar and circuitry technology continued. In 1946, scientists at Fort Monmouth successfully reflected electronic signals off the moon, proving it was possible to send electronic signals over vast distances and paving the way for modern satellite technology. As the technological competition of Cold War heated up, Fort Monmouth laboratories were integral to the space race, espionage technology, and computing. The fort was

also a location where African American scientists broke down racial barriers and challenged social injustice, which Ziobro details in Chapter 6.

Ziobro's *Fort Monmouth: The US Army's House of Magic* succeeds as both a compelling local history and a significant contribution to our understanding of how military technology has evolved. The book's greatest strength lies in its ability to humanize the often abstract story of military-industrial development, showing how technological breakthroughs emerged from the dedication of the researchers, soldiers, and civilians who called Fort Monmouth home. Her work stands as both a fitting tribute to Fort Monmouth's legacy and a valuable model for how military historians can capture the full complexity of defense installations that have shaped American history.

Megan Sethi

Worcester Polytechnic Institute