

NJS Presents**Museums, Archives, Artifacts, and Documents News****In this Issue:*****The 100th Anniversary of Fort Monmouth*****By Floyd Hertweck, Susan Thompson, and Melissa Ziobro****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v3i2.90>**

April 1917 marks the 100th anniversary of the American entry into World War I. The war brought many changes to NJ, to include the creation of military bases like Fort Monmouth. First called Camp Little Silver, then Camp Alfred Vail, and finally Fort Monmouth, the base stood up in June 1917. Though it was supposed to be temporary, the base remained open until September 2011. The majority of personnel stationed at the base, employed by the U.S. Army Communications-Electronics Command (CECOM), moved to Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland. There, the Fort Monmouth/CECOM archive is maintained to this day. In honor of what would have been the base's 100th anniversary, we present a brief recap of the 1917 activities of the site, along with two early photographs from the archive.

The Army realized as early as 1916 that the Signal Corps' strength of around 2,000 officers and enlisted men was incapable of providing needed communications support should the United States enter World War I, which had been raging in Europe since 1914. Consequently, in October of that year, the Office of the Chief Signal Officer (OCSigO) asked the executives of American Telephone and Telegraph, Western Electric, Western Union, and the Postal Telegraph Company to recruit from among their trained employees personnel for a Signal Enlisted Reserve Corps. The response was more than could have been hoped for; for example, 1,400 of the 6,000 male employees of the Bell Telephone Company of Pennsylvania applied for enlistment.

The United States entered WWI when in early April 1917, Congress declared war on Germany. The U.S. House of Representatives approved the war resolution 373-50, while the U.S. Senate approved it 82-6. As the Army grew with the declaration, so, too, did the Signal Corps, which needed space in which to prepare the citizen Soldiers it was recruiting. The history of Fort Monmouth, then, began just one month later, in May 1917, when the Army authorized four training camps for signal troops. One camp would be located at Little Silver, New Jersey - that which eventually would be known as "Fort Monmouth." Fort Leavenworth, Kansas; Leon Springs, Texas; and the Presidio of Monterey, California housed the others. Government-owned land was utilized for all the camps except that at Little Silver.

The Little Silver site was chosen after Colonel (retired) Carl F. Hartmann, then a lieutenant colonel and signal officer of the Eastern Department in New York City, tasked Major General (retired) Charles H. Corlett, then a first lieutenant, to "go out and find an officer's training camp." Corlett recalled his initial discovery of the site, formerly the home of the Monmouth Park Racetrack, in a 1955 letter addressed to Colonel Sidney S. Davis, Chairman of the Fort Monmouth Traditions Committee. He reported that after examining several other sites, he "finally stumbled onto the old Race Course near Eatontown. I found part of the old steel grandstand with eleven railroad sidings behind it, the old two mile straight away track and two oval race tracks, all badly overgrown with weeds and underbrush." Corlett went on to describe how he arranged a meeting with the owner of the land. "Upon inquiry, I learned that the land belonged to an old man who lived in Eatontown who was very ill (on his death bed in fact), but when he learned my business, he was anxious to see me."¹

¹ Personal letter from Major General Charles H. Corlett to Colonel Sidney S. Davis dated 3 December 1955. Available via the U.S. Army Communications-Electronics Command Historical Office, Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland.

Corlett learned that the owner, Melvin Van Keuren, had offered to give the land to the Army free of charge during the Spanish American War. Van Keuren regretfully informed Corlett that he could no longer afford to do so. He offered instead to sell the land for \$75,000.² Corlett returned to his superior officers to report his findings. The government decided to lease the tract from Van Keuren, with an option to buy. The land, portions of which were being used as a potato farm at the time, included 468 acres bounded on the North by the Shrewsbury River, on the West and South by a stone road from Eatontown, and on the East by the Oceanport-Little Silver Road. Parker Creek, a tributary of the Shrewsbury, traversed the entire property near the northern limits. Notwithstanding the desolation of the site in 1917 – largely overgrown and infested with poison ivy – it afforded the Army significant advantages: several hundred feet of siding on a rail line of Hoboken (a port of embarkation) and proximity to the passenger terminal in Little Silver, as well as good stone roads and access by water. The *Red Bank Register* dated 6 June 1917 reported that portions of the land leased by the government had been “farmed for the past four years by Charles Prothero. He will continue to work the farm south of the railroad tracks but all property north of the tracks has been leased by the government. On this property is a seventy-acre field of potatoes. The government will recompense Mr. Prothero for this crop.”³

The first thirty-two Signal Soldiers arrived at Fort Monmouth in June 1917, reportedly in two Model T Ford trucks. This advance party under 1st Lieutenant Adolph J. Dekker brought tents,

² Ibid.

³ Richard Bingham, *Fort Monmouth, New Jersey: A Concise History* (Fort Monmouth: U.S. Army Communications-Electronics Command, December 2002); Helen C. Pike and Glenn D. Vogel, *Eatontown and Fort Monmouth* (Mount Pleasant, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 1995), 80; “Passing of Monmouth Park: Once Famous Race Course of Jersey Cut Up Into Building Lots,” *New York Times*, April 10, 1910; Joel Kline, et al, *An Archeological Overview and Management Plan for Fort Monmouth (Main Post), Camp Charles Wood and the Evans Area* (New York: EnviroSphere Corporation, 1984); Lawrence Galton and Harold J. Wheelock, *A History of Fort Monmouth New Jersey 1917-1946* (Signal Corps Publications Agency, 1946), 12; Stenographic record of interview with COL Carl F. Hartmann, Signal Corps Retired, 26 October 1955 in the Office of the Chief Signal Officer. U.S. Army Communications-Electronics Command Historical Office, Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland.

tools, and other equipment from Bedloe's Island, New York, to prepare the site on 3 June. By 14 June, they had cleared several acres on which they installed a cantonment, quartermaster facilities, and a camp hospital, all under canvas.⁴



One of the early convoys to what would become Fort Monmouth, c. June 1917. Courtesy of the U.S. Army Communications-Electronics Command.

Corporal Carl L. Whitehurst was among the first men to arrive at Camp Little Silver. He later recalled that the site appeared to be a “jungle of weeds, poison ivy, briars, and underbrush.” While remnants of the old Monmouth Park Racetrack seemed to be everywhere, only one building

⁴ Stenographic record of interview with COL Carl F. Hartmann; Galton and Wheelock, 5.

remained habitable. It was there, in that former ticket booth, that he and his comrades stayed while awaiting the delivery of tents.⁵

The installation was originally named Camp Little Silver, based merely on its proximity to the Little Silver railroad station. General Orders dated 17 June 1917 named LTC Hartmann the first commander. Members of the First and Second Reserve Telegraph Battalions arrived by train the following day. The War Department transferred forty-three noncommissioned officers from Fort Sam Houston, Texas, to meet the need for a cadre of experienced personnel. These men had served on the Mexican border. Four-hundred fifty-one enlisted men and twenty-five officers were stationed at Camp Little Silver by the end of the month.⁶

LTC Hartmann was relieved of his command on 13 July 1917 by Major George E. Mitchell. Mitchell organized the Reserve Officers' Training Battalion and two tactical units, the 5th Telegraph and 10th Field Signal Battalions. Instruction of trainees began on 23 July. The curriculum included cryptography, the heliograph, semaphore, wig-wag, motor vehicle operation, physical training, dismounted drill, tent pitching, interior guard duty, map reading, tables of organization for signal, infantry, and cavalry units, camp sanitation, personal hygiene, first aid, and horseback riding. The troops spent much of their time clearing the area of undergrowth, repairing and extending roads, and digging drainage ditches. One-hundred twenty-nine Soldiers were hospitalized for poison ivy exposure during the month.

⁵ "Shore Veteran Recalls Early Days of Post," *Monmouth Message*, May 18, 1967.

⁶ *Ibid.*



Tents just inside the East Gate, c. June 1917. Courtesy of the U.S. Army Communications-Electronics Command.

The Camp sent its first units (the First and Second Reserve Telegraph Battalions) to the port of embarkation on 7 August 1917. These units reconstituted in theater as the 406th Telegraph Battalion and the 407th Telegraph Battalion.

The camp achieved semi-permanent status and was re-named Camp Alfred Vail on 15 September 1917, just three months after its establishment. Vail, an associate of telegraph inventor Samuel F. B. Morse, was credited with helping develop commercial telegraphy.⁷ Meanwhile, the Signal Corps faced an urgent need for telegraphers and radio operators in France. A six-week intensive training course on foreign codes and languages began at Camp Alfred Vail. The Army

⁷ Order 122, Office of the Chief Signal Officer, 21 August 1917.

sent 223 men to the Camp for training and testing as German-speaking personnel. Additional groups of fifty or more arrived each month thereafter. The need for telegraph operators in France was so great that operators volunteering for overseas duty received bonuses.⁸

The 11th Reserve Telegraph Battalion boarded the train for Hoboken on 18 October 1917. Other units followed in rapid succession – a Radio Operator Detachment and the 408th Telegraph Battalion in November, and the 52nd Telegraph Battalion and the 1st Field Signal Battalion in December. Camp Alfred Vail trained a total of 2,416 enlisted men and 448 officers for war in 1917. Between August 1917 and October 1918, American Expeditionary Forces in France received five telegraph battalions, two field signal battalions, one depot battalion, and an aero construction squadron from Camp Alfred Vail. Unfortunately, most of the lumber that arrived at Camp Alfred Vail to build the barracks for these men was green. According to CPL Whitehurst, “By the time the wood was dried out it was winter, and in December there were cracks you could put your finger through. The winter of 1917-1918 was a tough one, and sometimes the snow would pile up on your blankets, coming through the gaps in the boards.”⁹ The men survived that first winter, though, and Signal Corps training embarked “amid the fire-gutted ruins of Monmouth Park and Charles Prothero’s potatoes.”¹⁰

In addition to the construction of barracks, the particular demands of tank and aerial warfare in World War I necessitated a special Army laboratory devoted exclusively to developmental work. This laboratory would be entirely independent of the commercial laboratories. It would be a place where trained specialists could focus their energies on problems in wireless communication. The existing Electrical Development Division in Washington and the

⁸ Signal ROTC courses in prominent universities throughout the United States were also training radio operators and telegraphers. See “Historical Sketch of the Signal Corps,” Signal School Pamphlet No. 32 (Fort Monmouth, 1929).

⁹ “Shore Veteran Recalls Early Days of Post,” *Monmouth Message*, May 18, 1967.

¹⁰ Galton and Wheelock, 16.

facilities in the Bureau of Standards were deemed insufficient for experimentation. Camp Vail was instead selected as the site. Construction began in mid-December 1917. It was largely finished by the end of January. In addition to forty-three semi-permanent laboratory buildings in the vicinity of what is now Barker Circle, the contractor (Heddon Construction Company) drained and leveled ground for two air fields and built four hangars east of Oceanport Avenue.

The Army charged the radio laboratory with the development of radio equipment. Research initially centered on vacuum tubes, circuits of existing equipment, the testing of apparatus submitted by manufacturers, and the application of new inventions. A staff of forty-eight officers, forty-five enlisted men and twelve civilians (principally stenographers) accomplished this work.

Within a month, the radio equipment produced required ninety to ninety-five airplane flights a week for testing. This led area residents to mistakenly believe that Camp Vail was primarily an airfield. The camp's flying activity reached its peak during this time, with personnel of the 122nd Aero Squadron operating a total of twenty aircraft: two DeHaviland 4s, nine Curtiss JN4-Hs, six Curtiss 4-6HOs, and three Curtiss JN-4Ds. This represented the largest number of aircraft ever housed at Camp Vail.

Less than two years later, by the end of 1918, many dubbed the Camp the "best equipped Signal Corps camp ever established anywhere."¹¹ Just nineteen months after its acquisition by the military, 129 semi-permanent structures had been built. The radio laboratories utilized forty-seven of these exclusively. Housing was available for 2,975 Soldiers and 188 officers. Should those men fall ill, there was a hospital equipped to handle forty patients. Two temporary stables could house up to 160 horses. Hard surfaced roads facilitated transportation. One swamp was converted into

¹¹ "Fort Monmouth Locale Steeped in American Military Tradition," *Monmouth Message*, May 18 1967.

parade grounds. Another was converted into four company streets, which would be lined by 200 tents.¹²

The sudden growth of the camp brought to the area a prosperity which had been absent since the height of the Monmouth Park Racetrack's popularity. The Soldiers proved to be "good spenders" and "their relatives, sweethearts, and friends swelled the trade of the storekeepers."¹³ The *Red Bank Register* remarked that the "Little Silver mail route has been extended to take in the camp. This will probably bring an increase in the salary of Arthur Ryerson, the mail carrier."¹⁴

The Chief Signal Officer would authorize the purchase of the Camp Vail in 1919. The Signal Corps School relocated to Camp Vail from Fort Leavenworth in that year. The Signal Corps Board followed in 1924. The installation would be granted permanent status and renamed Fort Monmouth in August 1925.

Until its closure in 2011, Fort Monmouth was still innovating some of the most significant communications and electronics advances in military history. From homing pigeons to frequency hopping tactical radios, Fort Monmouth was the home of heroes and scientists, the birthplace of innovation and technological revolution. None of it would have been possible if not for the men who overcame the obstacles - from the hard bargaining Mr. Van Keuren, to the poison ivy, to the green lumber, to the tough winter - that loomed there 100 years ago. The Communications-Electronics Command (CECOM) that left Fort Monmouth in 2011 for Aberdeen Proving Ground can trace its roots to the establishment of a Signal Corps training facility and radio research and development laboratory at Fort Monmouth, NJ in 1917.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Galton and Wheelock, 6.

¹⁴ Galton and Wheelock, 16-17.

The CECOM History office at Aberdeen Proving Ground maintains a varied collection relating to Signal Corps history, the history of Fort Monmouth, the organizations which trace their roots to the Signal Corps laboratories, and the extensive equipment and systems developed and maintained by these organizations. This collection includes:

- 1,671 linear feet of paper/book collections
- 1800 volume library
- 124,250 cubic feet of collections (WWI photographs, newspapers, films, technical manuals)
- 8,715 cubic feet of collections in map cabinets
- Over 10,000 technical manuals
- Over 240,000 digital files
- Over 100,000 photographs (negatives and positives)

Inquiries about the collection can be made to usarmy.APG.cecom.mbx.cecom-lcmc-historian-cecom-lcmc-dcsops@mail.mil

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