





*Historical photos document early operations of Camp Lee, Virginia, during the beginning of World War I.*

# The Three Lives of Fort Lee, Virginia: World War I

In this first article of a series commemorating the 100th anniversary of Fort Lee, the author details the origins of the installation's long history of training troops.

■ By Dr. Kenneth Finlayson

2017 marks the 100th anniversary of Fort Lee, Virginia. Fort Lee was created during the U.S. mobilization for World War I, and its history can be divided into three distinct phases. It was first constructed to train an infantry division for combat in France, but the ensuing century witnessed major changes in the post's mission and focus.

Today, Fort Lee is the home of Army sustainment. Throughout its history, Fort Lee has played a significant role in Army training and continues to contribute to the Army of the future.

Fort Lee occupies nearly 6,000 acres in Prince George County, east of Petersburg. It is home to the Combined Arms Support Command as well as major Department

of Defense organizations such as the Defense Contract Management Agency and the Defense Commissary Agency. Fort Lee supports a daily population in excess of 26,000 military and civilian personnel, including a student population of 16,000 Soldiers, Airmen, Marines, Sailors, civilians, and foreign partners. It is the third largest training center in the Army.

## Entering World War I

World War I began in August 1914 with the German invasion of France. The war quickly evolved into a stalemate between the Central Powers of Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the forces of the Triple Entente of France, Russia, and the United Kingdom.

On the Western Front, 475 miles of trenches stretched from the North

first mission of the War Department was to establish training camps for the influx of volunteers. Thirty-four camps were initially scheduled for construction.

The Army's approach to the mobilization was twofold. The existing 16 National Guard divisions would be trained at cantonments that were generally expansions of existing camps. To accommodate the flood of

tesville, Virginia, was awarded the contract for building the camp with the firm of Saville and Claiborne of Richmond acting as the supervisory engineers. Maj. E.K. Coe of the Army Quartermaster Corps was the War Department's Cantonment Division on-site representative. Construction began on June 10, 1917, but was promptly halted.

The DuPont Company (then Du Pont de Nemours and Company) filed a protest with the federal government seeking to prevent the construction of the camp. DuPont operated a large manufacturing facility in nearby Hopewell that produced gun cotton, a key component for munitions. The company feared that the construction of the camp would have a negative impact on their 28,000-member workforce and the rail networks supporting their operations.

Eager to reap the economic benefits of the camp's construction, the city of Petersburg promptly sent a delegation to Washington, D.C. The delegation successfully had the injunction lifted, and building of the camp began in earnest on June 21, 1917. Construction moved into high gear, and within 60 days, the first barracks were ready for occupation.

The camp was laid out in a horseshoe shape roughly four miles long. Sixteen million linear feet of lumber was ordered to build the more than 3,000 buildings on the cantonment.

More than 50 types of buildings were required, including 1,500 200-man barracks, a thousand-bed hospital composed of 40 buildings with two operating theaters, 10 large warehouses, numerous orderly rooms, headquarters buildings, and even a large incinerator facility.

Seven hundred horse- and mule-drawn wagon teams worked steadily to haul materials to the building site until a railroad line could be laid into the camp. Nine miles of roads and over 30 miles of sewer and water lines supported the cantonment. A workforce that eventually numbered

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Sea to the Swiss border through Belgium and France. In the east, the enormous Russian army battled the Central Powers in western Russia and Galicia.

For 2 1/2 years, the United States maintained a position of neutrality. President Woodrow Wilson narrowly won his second term in office in 1916 running on the slogan, "He kept us out of war." This abstention ultimately proved unsustainable because of unrestrained German submarine attacks on U.S. commercial shipping and because of Great Britain's and France's unrelenting political pressure on the United States to join the war.

On April 2, 1917, Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war on Germany, saying U.S. participation was necessary to "make the world safe for democracy." Congress declared war four days later, and the nation immediately began a massive mobilization effort to raise a million-man Army to fight overseas.

## Training Camps

The United States was woefully unprepared for war; it had a regular army of only 108,000 men. To reach the target of a million Soldiers, the

untrained volunteers, the War Department also created an additional 16 divisions organized into what was called the National Army. These divisions would be trained at newly constructed camps serving the geographic regions from which the volunteers were drawn.

The principal difference between the camps was that the National Guard troops were billeted in tents while the cantonments for the National Army divisions featured wooden barracks. With the declaration of war, a flurry of construction began around the country.

## Building Camp Lee

On April 24, 1917, the War Department notified the Petersburg Chamber of Commerce that a site in adjacent Prince George County had been selected for the construction of a National Army cantonment. The city leased 450 acres of farmland and forest to the War Department for the cantonment site and an additional 15,000 acres for a maneuver training area (land that included acreage on what is now the Petersburg National Battlefield).

The construction company of Rinehart and Dennis of Charlot-



13,000 men battled chronic material shortages while trying to meet the construction schedule.

When a nationwide shortage of railroad boxcars prevented the delivery of the plumbing fixtures needed for the buildings, the Army arranged for the sinks and toilets to be brought from the manufacturer in commandeered civilian passenger cars.

The feverish pace of construction was in full swing when the camp acquired its official name in midsummer. On July 15, 1917, the Army designated the cantonment Camp Lee. Named for Robert E. Lee, the most famous Confederate general of the Civil War and a native son of the Commonwealth of Virginia, Camp Lee reflected the convention of the times, which favored naming cantonments south of the Mason-Dixon Line for Confederate generals. (The presence of influential southern Democratic senators on the major committees in Congress was a significant factor.)

With a capacity for 60,335 men, Camp Lee, was the second largest cantonment constructed in the country. (Ironically, only Camp Grant in Illinois exceeded Camp Lee in capacity.) The building of Camp Lee was well underway when the first troops began arriving in August 1917.

### Training at Camp Lee

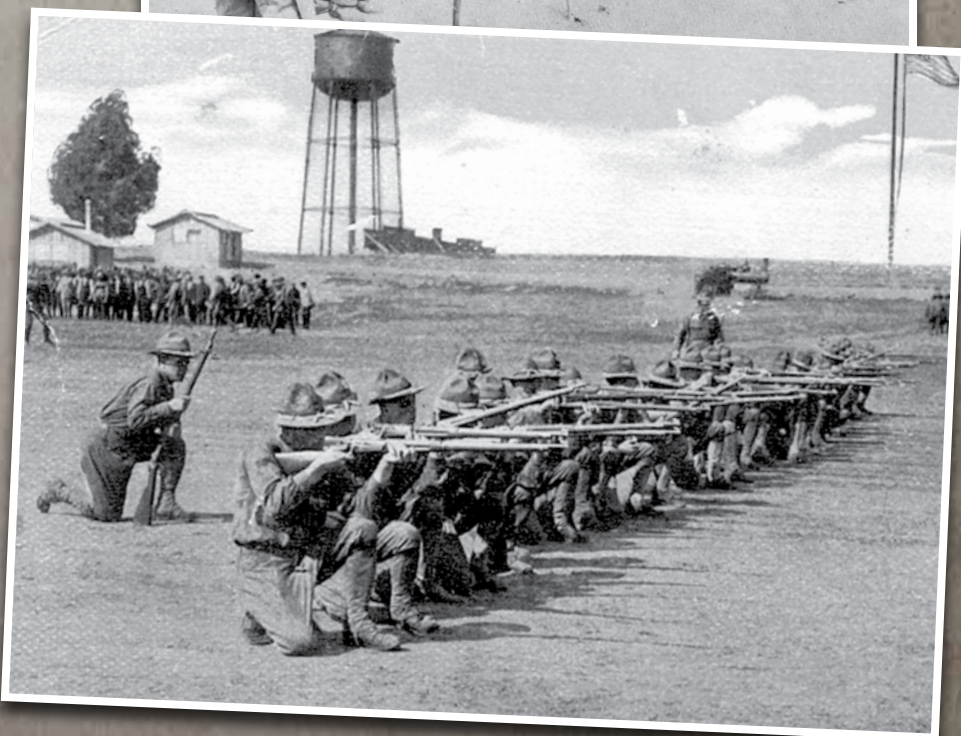
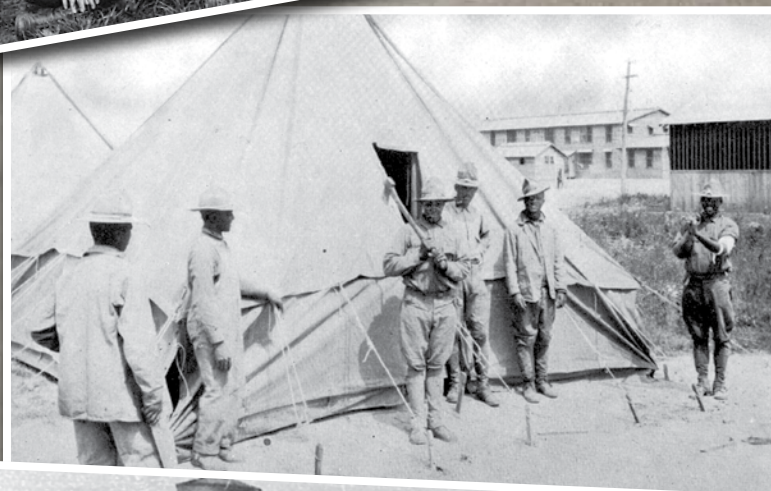
Built to support the training of one of the newly raised National Army divisions, Camp Lee was designated the home of the 80th Division. Composed predominately of volunteers from Virginia, West Virginia, and western Pennsylvania, the "Blue Ridge Division" officially unfurled its colors on August 5, 1917.

Maj. Gen. Adelbert Cronkhite, the division commander, established the division headquarters in the "White House," the only permanent residence on the base. (Known today as Davis House, the building is still used for distinguished visitor lodging.) Training soon began as new arrivals continued to swell the ranks.

In World War I, U.S. Army divi-







sions were organized around two infantry brigades, each with two or more infantry regiments. Known as a "square division," a U.S. division numbered between 23,000 and 28,000 Soldiers and was twice the size of a British, French, or German army division.

In the 80th Division, the 159th Brigade, composed of the 317th and 318th Infantry Regiments and the 313th Machine Gun Battalion, and the 160th Brigade, made up of the 319th and 320th Infantry Regiments and the 315th Machine Gun Battalion, formed the maneuver elements. The 156th Field Artillery Brigade, comprising the 313th, 314th, and 315th Field Artillery Battalions, provided direct-fire support to the brigades. Shortages of equipment and the inexperience of the volunteers dictated the training program.

While at Camp Lee, the officers and noncommissioned officers of the 80th Division trained volunteers in basic Soldier and combat skills prior to their deployment overseas. Once the Soldiers arrived in France, more advanced unit training would be conducted before commencing combat operations. Essentially, the cadre of the 80th Division conducted basic and advanced individual training called the "School of the Soldier" in preparation for their deployment, which was scheduled for the spring of 1918.

The Blue Ridge Division sailed for France on June 8, 1918. It would be 12 months before the men would set foot on U.S. soil again. After the Blue Ridge Division's departure, the 37th "Buckeye Division" of the Ohio National Guard spent several weeks training at Camp Lee before its own departure for France.

For the remainder of the summer and fall of 1918, Camp Lee was home to a continuous stream of individual replacements. A training program for infantry officers was conducted and basic combat training for new enlisted men was held. A steady population of more than 40,000 troops trained at Camp Lee





until the signing of the armistice on November 11, 1918, brought the war to an abrupt halt.

The 80th Division returned from France on board the *USS Zeppelin*, which landed in Norfolk, Virginia, on May 28, 1919. The division had earned a well-deserved reputation as one of the most effective combat units in the U.S. Army. It fought in the Somme and Saint-Mihiel Offensives and was the only U.S. division to take part in all three phases of the massive Meuse-Argonne Campaign.

This hard fighting cost the division 6,029 casualties, including 880 dead and 5,149 wounded. Following a rapid demobilization, the Blue Ridge Division was inactivated at

Camp Lee on June 26, 1919.

With the inactivation of the 80th Division, the first phase of Camp Lee's existence had come full circle. After World War I, the United States systematically closed many of the cantonments constructed during the mobilization. Camp Lee was no exception; in 1921, the land and buildings were turned over to the Commonwealth of Virginia.

All of the buildings with the exception of the White House were torn down and the land was reverted to a state game and forest preserve. A portion of the land that included an extensive network of training trenches was incorporated into the Petersburg National Battlefield. Twenty years later, with war clouds

again gathering on the horizon, Camp Lee would be reconstructed to begin the second phase of its life as a training camp for World War II.

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