

## Celebrate Fort Monmouth's 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary!

*The Army realized as early as 1916 that the Signal Corps's strength of around 2,000 officers and enlisted men was incapable of providing needed communications support should the United States enter World War I. This small service, with personnel obtained chiefly by the detail system, had been designed primarily for border and insular operations. 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.*

### *April 1917*

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.

### *May 1917*

The Signal Corps needed space in which to prepare the citizen Soldiers it had recruited for service in the battles that lay ahead. The history of Fort Monmouth, then, began just one month later, in May 1917, when the Army established 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 for 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."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Personal letter from Major General Charles H. Corlett to Colonel Sidney S. Davis dated 3 December 1955.

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.<sup>2</sup>

Corlett returned to his superior officers to report his findings. The government then leased 468 acres of the tract from Van Keuren, with an option to buy. The land, which was 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.”<sup>3</sup>

#### *June 1917*

The first thirty-two Signal Soldiers arrived at Fort Monmouth in June 1917 in two Model T Ford trucks. This advance party under 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant Adolph J. Dekker brought tents, 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.<sup>4</sup>

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

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Bingham, Richard. “Fort Monmouth, New Jersey: A Concise History.” Communications-Electronics Command, December 2002; Pike and Vogel, *Eatontown*, 80; PASSING OF MONMOUTH PARK.; Once Famous Race Course of Jersey Cut Up Into Building Lots. Special to The New York Times. New York Times (1857-Current file). New York, N.Y.: Apr 10, 1910. p. 6 (1 page); An Archeological Overview and Management Plan for Fort Monmouth (Main Post), Camp Charles Wood and the Evans Area, 1984; Galton and Wheelock, *History of Fort Monmouth*, 12; Stenographic record of interview with COL Carl F. Hartmann, Signal Corps Retired, 26 October 1955 in the Office of the Chief Signal Officer; An Archeological Overview and Management Plan for Fort Monmouth (Main Post), Camp Charles Wood and the Evans Area, 1984; Historical Properties Report, Fort Monmouth, New Jersey and Sub installations Charles Wood Area and Evans Area, July 1983.

<sup>4</sup> Stenographic record of interview with COL Carl F. Hartmann, Signal Corps Retired, 26 October 1955 in the Office of the Chief Signal Officer; Untitled manuscript, Communications Electronics Command Archives, Fort Monmouth; *History of Fort Monmouth*, 5.

everywhere, only one building remained habitable. It was there, in that former ticket booth, that he and his comrades stayed while awaiting the delivery of tents.<sup>5</sup>

The installation was originally named Camp Little Silver, based merely on its location. 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. 451 enlisted men and twenty-five officers were stationed at Camp Little Silver by the end of the month.<sup>6</sup>

### *July 1917*

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 5<sup>th</sup> Telegraph and 10<sup>th</sup> 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. 129 Soldiers were hospitalized for poison ivy exposure during the month.<sup>7</sup>

### *August 1917*

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 406<sup>th</sup> Telegraph Battalion and the 407<sup>th</sup> Telegraph Battalion.

### *September 1917*

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. Vail made significant contributions to wire communications that many felt merited the commemoration of his name at a Signal Corps Camp.<sup>8</sup>

However, COL Hartmann suggested in a 1955 interview that the Army's Chief Signal Officer, MG George Owen Squier, named the camp after Alfred Vail to honor Squier's good friend and Alfred Vail's distant relative, Theodore N. Vail, Chief Executive Officer of American Telephone and Telegraph. In the words of COL

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<sup>5</sup> "Shore Veteran Recalls Early Days of Post," *Monmouth Message*, May 18, 1967 p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Order 122, Office of the Chief Signal Officer, 21 August 1917.

Hartmann: “Recognizing the impropriety of naming the Post for Theodore N. Vail, it requires no stretch of the imagination to figure out why he (MG Squier) came to name it ‘Camp Alfred E. Vail’.” The impropriety COL Hartman mentioned could have referred to either the Army’s selectively honoring one of several potentially worthy top corporate officers on the basis of a personal friendship, or in the would-be break in custom of naming an installation after a living person. The Chief of the Signal Corps Historical Division, who conducted the 1955 interview, said the Signal Corps owed nothing to Alfred Vail, who died a year before the Corps was even established. They did, however, owe a good deal to Theodore Vail, who, “helped provide the Signal Corps in World War I with communication company specialists manning the Corps’ telegraph battalions.”<sup>9</sup>

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 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.<sup>10</sup>

#### *October 1917*

The 11<sup>th</sup> Reserve Telegraph Battalion boarded the train for Hoboken on 18 October 1917.

#### *November 1917*

Other units followed in rapid succession – a Radio Operator Detachment and the 408<sup>th</sup> Telegraph Battalion in November, and...

#### *December 1917*

...the 52<sup>nd</sup> Telegraph Battalion and the 1<sup>st</sup> 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 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

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<sup>9</sup> Stenographic record of interview with COL Carl F. Hartmann, Signal Corps Retired, 26 October 1955 in the Office of the Chief Signal Officer.

<sup>10</sup> 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).

blankets, coming through the gaps in the boards.”<sup>11</sup> 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.”<sup>12</sup>

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 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 122<sup>nd</sup> 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.

#### *All in a Year’s Work...*

Less than two years later, by the end of 1918, many dubbed the Camp the “best equipped Signal Corps camp ever established anywhere.”<sup>13</sup> 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 parade grounds. Another was converted into four company streets, which would be lined by 200 tents.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> “Shore Veteran Recalls Early Days of Post,” *Monmouth Message*, May 18, 1967 p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> Galton and Wheelock, *History of Fort Monmouth*, 16.

<sup>13</sup> “Fort Monmouth Locale Steeped in American Military Tradition,” *Monmouth Message*, May 18 1967 p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> “Fort Monmouth Locale Steeped in American Military Tradition,” *Monmouth Message*, May 18 1967 p. 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."<sup>15</sup> 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."<sup>16</sup>

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.

For the past ninety years, Fort Monmouth has been the site of some of the most significant communications and electronics advances in military history. From homing pigeons to frequency hopping tactical radios, Fort Monmouth has been 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 here ninety years ago.

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<sup>15</sup> *History of Fort Monmouth*, 6.

<sup>16</sup> Galton and Wheelock, *History of Fort Monmouth*, 16-17.