

Historian summarizes history of Vancouver Barracks

By Major Jefferson Davis

Sunday, July 4, 2010

The city of Vancouver has long ties with Vancouver Barracks, the longest occupied U.S. Army post west of the Mississippi. The city formed around the post, and many of Vancouver's early citizens were retired soldiers, and many of their descendants still live in the area. Although Vancouver Barracks seems a quiet military backwater today, in the 160-plus years since it was founded, its soldiers have participated in many Indian campaigns across the Pacific Northwest and other major conflicts such as the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, World War I and World War II. This is a very brief historic overview of Vancouver Barracks.

On Nov. 29, 1847, members of the Cayuse Tribe attacked the Whitman Mission, killing 14 people, and taking 53 women and children hostage. This began the Cayuse War, which raged from December 1847 to August 1848. Following word of the Whitmans' murders, in August 1848, Congress created the Oregon Territory and ordered a military presence in the Pacific Northwest.

On May 13, 1849, Major John S. Hatheway and elements of the First Artillery arrived by ship near the Hudson's Bay Company post of Fort Vancouver. One of the first things Hatheway did was to find a tall tree overlooking the Columbia River. He sent a 14 year-old drummer boy up the tree with a rope and pulley, which the boy tied to the treetop. On this, the soldiers raised the American flag, then began work on what some called Camp Columbia and others called Camp Vancouver. Around the same time, on May 10, 1849, Col. William Loring set out for the Oregon Territory from the Midwest with a regiment of mounted riflemen, 700 horses, 171 wagons of supplies and 1,200 mules. Traveling overland, they reached Hatheway's camp in early October 1849.

After the barracks buildings were completed, in 1851 the post changed its name to Camp Columbia. In 1853, the name was changed to Fort Vancouver and finally changed again to Vancouver Barracks in 1878. The original boundary the U.S. Army claimed was 10 square miles. It also changed shape and size, eventually shrinking to one square mile. From the Columbia River, the reservation boundary ran north two miles to what is now Fourth Plain Road, and east from what is approximately now Interstate 5, a half mile to East Reserve Street.

The U.S. Army's purpose was to help enforce the laws of the United States and to protect its citizens. The soldiers at the barracks found themselves doing just that in several campaigns against many Native American tribes. These campaigns included, the First Rogue River War in 1853, the Second Rogue River War from 1855–1856, the Yakima Wars (which included other tribes) from 1855–1858, the Modoc War of 1872–1873, the Nez Perce War of 1877, the Bannock and Paiute wars of 1878, and the Shoshone War of 1879.

During the Civil War, many of the regular Army soldiers were reassigned east to fight for the North, while some officers resigned their commissions and fought on the Confederate side. Meanwhile, a small regular Army garrison remained at Vancouver Barracks, which served as a supply depot. The soldier supported militia detachments occupying several newly built blockhouses and forts across the Pacific Northwest. Fearing Confederate naval attacks, they also built the first coastal defenses at the mouth of the Columbia River, near Warrenton, Ore. At the end of the Civil War, regular Army soldiers slowly returned to duty on the frontier, while some of the volunteer forces did not muster out until 1866.

In addition to actions against Native Americans, Vancouver Barracks soldiers kept civil order across the Pacific Northwest. Their duties ranged from guarding wagon trains to catching robbers in mining towns to stopping race or labor riots. As the 19th century ended, as American interests expanded outside the continental United States, so did their duties.

When the Spanish–American War broke out in 1898, the barracks became a staging area for the 14th Infantry, which was stationed there, as well as volunteer units raised in the Pacific Northwest. Once they reached the western Pacific, the 14th captured Guam, then Gen. Thomas M. Anderson, commander of the 14th, led the force that captured Manila. After the war, most of the volunteer regiments returned to the Pacific Northwest, where most of them mustered out at the barracks. The 14th Infantry remained in the Philippines during what some have called the Philippine Insurrection. It and other units rotated back and forth between the United States and East Asia, up to the beginning of World War I.

World War I

In World War I, Vancouver Barracks changed focus. Before the war, combat troops trained and prepared for war, a tactical mission. During WWI, the barracks' mission became a strategic one; helping to provide parts for the new super weapon, the airplane. World War I-era planes were made of fabric stretched over wood frames. The lighter and stronger the wood, the faster the plane flew. The lightest, strongest wood available was spruce, which was plentiful in the Pacific Northwest. The problem was getting the trees cut down, and turned into lumber.

In 1918, former Army Captain Brice P. Disque returned to active duty, was promoted to colonel and placed in command of the Spruce Production Division, which had major operations at Vancouver Barracks. This operation opened the world's largest spruce cut-up mill at Vancouver Barracks on Feb. 6, 1918. The mill ran around the clock, operated by soldiers. All told, over 36,000 soldiers worked with civilians across the Pacific Northwest, cutting and transporting lumber to the Vancouver mill and elsewhere. The plant continued to operate after WWI ended in November, 1918. It shut down on Feb. 4, 1919, after producing much of the 88.5 million board foot of spruce lumber in Washington state.

World War II

As in World War I, Vancouver Barracks became a strategic post in World War II. After Pearl Harbor, the barracks became a staging area for the Portland sub-port of embarkation, where critical goods and personnel were received or shipped out to support the war effort. Another

chief player in the mission of the Vancouver Barracks was Lt. Gen. Edmund Gregory, the quartermaster general of the U.S. Army.

Gregory had served at Vancouver Barracks in the early 1900s, with the 14th Infantry Regiment. This took him to the Philippines from 1912–1915, serving in many logistical roles, including senior quartermaster in Manila. Gregory knew most casualties came from poor hygiene, leading to trench foot, lice, dysentery, malaria and other diseases. He saw the need for a massive field hygiene program for the Army. Mallory created a massive new Quartermaster School System at Vancouver Barracks. One company of the 308th Quartermaster Fumigation and Bath Battalion, which trained at the Vancouver Barracks, could body sterilize (de-louse) up to 30,000 troops with DDT in 12 hours. They could also sterilize enough fresh water to provide for laundry and clean uniforms and finally, set up showers to finish the hygiene process. Several units like this formed, trained and departed Vancouver Barracks to serve in both the European and Pacific theaters.

In 1946, after WWII ended and military units were disbanded, Vancouver Barracks was declared excess to the needs of the Army. A good deal of the military cantonment north of Officers Row was parceled out to local or federal agencies. Many buildings were torn down, and equipment sold or removed. Despite this decrease, the core of Vancouver Barracks continued serving a military purpose. In December 1946, the headquarters of the 104th Reserve Infantry Division, which had a distinguished history in WWII, was reactivated at Vancouver Barracks. In the six decades that have passed, many different Army Reserve and National Guard soldiers have served proudly at Vancouver Barracks.

Major Jefferson Davis is Historian for the 104th Division (Leader Training