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World War II Barracks

by Myles “Mike” Grant

This article is written to provide the historical context which drove the need for the Army to construct thousands of these now iconic wooden barracks and administration buildings across the United States during the period leading up to the U.S. entry into World War II and during the war years, to detail the historical context which led to the development of the North Fort cantonment on Fort Lewis in 1941, to discuss the history of their design and layout and to acknowledge the generations of soldiers who lived and trained in these facilities over the last 70 years.

The 11 November 1918 armistice signaled the end of hostilities of the “Great War” or “The War to End War,” later known as World War I, but by 1940, the world was again at war. In the early 1930s Japan invaded China. In 1936 Germany remilitarized the Rhineland and in 1938 annexed Austria and the Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia. In 1939 the Germans, Italians and Japanese created a military alliance. In September 1939 the Germans and Russians invaded Poland and England declared war on Germany. In 1940 Germany occupied the Netherlands and Denmark. Then, on 10 May 1940, the Germans invaded France and within six weeks conquered the country. By late 1940 the Battle of Britain was raging with pitched air battles between German and British aircraft in the skies above Great Britain.



World War II Barracks and Administrative Buildings,
North Fort Lewis, circa 1956.

In the United States, isolationist sentiments ran deep and only reluctantly did the U.S. start making itself ready in the event it was drawn into conflict as had happened during the First World War two decades earlier.

In response to Germany's conquest of continental Europe, on 8 September 1939, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt proclaimed a Limited National Emergency. Among other measures of defense preparation, this executive order expanded the Army from 210,000 to 227,000 soldiers and increased the National Guard by 100,000 troops. On 16 September 1940, at the urging of President Roosevelt, Congress passed the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940, also known as the Burke-Wadsworth Act, which was the first peacetime conscription in United States history, significantly expanding the armed forces.

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Newly constructed barracks building, North Fort Lewis, 1940.

The Selective Training and Service Act of 1940 resulted in an influx of 26,000 regular soldiers and mobilized National Guardsmen to a Fort Lewis garrison only capable of housing the 7,000 soldiers already posted there. March 1941 saw another 11,000 troops bound for Fort Lewis, and by the spring of 1941 over 37,000 soldiers were maneuvering on the Nisqually Plains of the installation. This rapid influx of soldiers put a strain on the infrastructure of the post – where were all these soldiers to be organized, housed and fed?

Not just Fort Lewis, but all the other installations around the United States had to expand rapidly as well in the years leading up to the U.S. entry into World War II and during the war. The Army, however, initially did not plan to build many new cantonment structures. The prevailing plan for Army for mobilization, the Protective Mobilization Plan of 1938, mirrored that of World War I. The plan called for little construction as soldiers would be housed in existing facilities and tents only for the initial mobilization. Shortly thereafter, they would deploy overseas to complete their training, vacating stateside facilities for new troops, just as the Army had done during the First World War. However, with France occupied and German armies poised on the English Channel and with England fighting for her existence while simultaneously struggling to house soldiers from

several European countries in addition to her own soldiers, the War Department faced the unexpected challenge of accommodating a huge standing army that would remain on U.S. soil for an extended period of time. This fact drove an immediate need for barracks, administrative buildings and training facilities.

The requirement to rapidly create infrastructure to house, feed and train a large Army generated the need for standardized building design to speed contracting and construction. These buildings were referred to as “Mobilization Type”: those built between 1940 and 1941 had the nomenclature “700 Series” and those built in 1942 and after were a slightly larger and technologically upgraded design designated “800 series” buildings. Series 700 building plans originated from the modification of building plans from structures used by the Army in 1917 during World War I. In 1928 the Quartermaster Corps was directed to update the World War I cantonment building plans. A few rough sketches gained G-4’s approval early in 1929, based on the 600 Series plans of World War I, but these were only drafts. Major Elsmere J. Walters of the Advisory Construction Division is credited with creating the final set of plans for the Series 700 buildings which would become so emblematic throughout Army installations during World War II and beyond.



Barracks Building being moved on a trailer, circa 1941. All the barracks buildings were supported by piers and were easy to relocate.

Series 700 and 800 buildings had many technological improvements over their First World War counterparts which vastly improved soldier living conditions. Indoor barracks lavatories replaced separate latrines and bath houses, iron pipes replaced wood staves, and motor pool bays replaced horse stables. One of the greatest improvements was central forced air heating system which did away with the cannon stove heaters of old which had taken up space inside the barracks, heated unevenly, competed for oxygen with the occupants and created a fire hazard. The new central heating system was housed in a separate mechanical room and circulated warm air uniformly throughout the building. While some of these heating systems relied on coal, many were designed initially to use the cleaner burning heating oil, and, eventually, all were upgraded to use oil as their source of fuel. While there were many technological improvements on the inside, except for the addition of an upstairs fire escape and an entry/exit door on the gabled end of the building, the base appearance of the buildings remained like their First World War counterparts, with six-over-six double-hung windows, wood-drop siding, and two-story height.

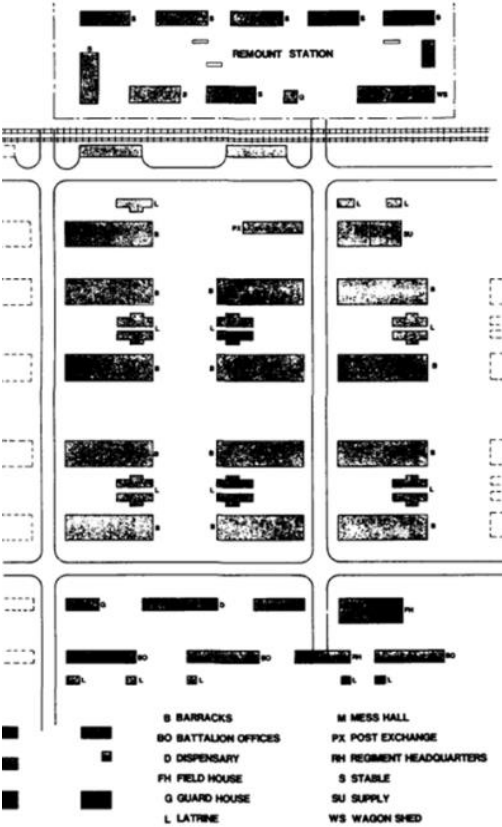


Figure 1: Regimental Area, 1917.

As iconic as the buildings themselves, so is their standardized regimental cantonment area layout throughout installations in the United States. The cantonment layouts for World War II differ from those of World War I in that triangular or quadrangular layouts were used for regimental areas instead of linear or U-shaped configurations. Figure 1 illustrates a typical regimental layout in 1917 and figure 2 shows the regimental layout in 1940. Within the regimental footprint were three battalion areas. Within the battalion area was the foundational element of the cantonment organization, company blocks designed to support 125 soldiers. Each company block consisted of two 63 soldier barracks buildings, one mess hall, one recreation building, and one supply building. For extensions of the camp, the directive ordered that more 63 soldier barracks be added and the mess hall capacity as each company unit expanded increased (per dashed building outlines on figure 2). Motor pools were at one end of the quadrangle and headquarters, officer barracks and other administrative buildings at the other end. To alleviate congestion, the regimental areas were laid out in such a manner that soldiers from one regiment did not have to cross through any other regimental areas in order to access motor pools or training areas.

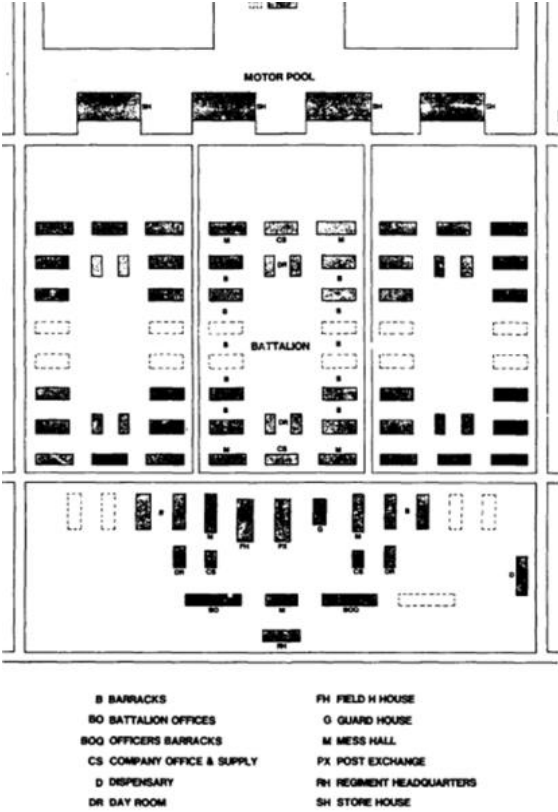


Figure 2: Regimental Area, 1940.

Going back to the situation at Fort Lewis: in May 1938 the 3rd Infantry Division and Fort Lewis only had about 5,000 soldiers in garrison. On 1 July 1940 the post garrison population increased in size to 7,000 with the arrival of IX Army Corps Headquarters from the Presidio of San Francisco. After September, with the Selective Service Act, troop levels increased dramatically. The 41st Infantry Division, consisting of 12,108 officers and enlisted, most of them Washington National Guardsmen, arrived at Fort Lewis in the fall of 1940. They were temporarily housed in tents on Camp Murray – a place the troops would nickname “Swamp Murray.” With 11,000 more troops planned for Fort Lewis in the spring of 1941, construction was started on an auxiliary training and troop center on 2,000 acres of ground on North Fort Lewis. By August 1941 over 1,000 series 700 barracks, headquarters, mess halls and other administrative buildings had been completed on North Fort Lewis and were ready for use.

It is interesting to note that in the autumn of 1939, the Army had a strength of about 200,000



Layout of World War II Mobilization Buildings, North Fort Lewis, from 1964 Fort Lewis Guide and Directory.

soldiers, a number that, while relatively small, strained the War Department's housing capacity, but, by November 1944, the Army was able to provide adequate housing for over six million service members in the United States alone. Only 270,000 out of the total of six million troops were lodged in buildings considered “permanent” while the majority lived in worked in “temporary” series 700 and 800 mobilization buildings. In total, more than 30,000 “temporary” mobilization buildings were constructed across the United States in a few short years – a program of military construction which has few parallels in world history.

While these World War II mobilization structures had been designated as “temporary” this does not mean that they were shoddily constructed. Quite the contrary, these 700 and 800 series mobilization structures were built with the best material and technology available to support the U. S. soldier and were built to last up to 20 years. The “temporary” designation came from the assumption that when the war was over the Army



Photos of JBLM Lewis North (Formerly North Fort Lewis) Barracks Buildings still standing, July 2019.



would drawdown to a small professional core, as it had done after all other wars, and that there would no longer be a need for the infrastructure these buildings represented. No one imagined the “Cold War” and other geo-political shifts which would cause the U.S. to retain significantly more military infrastructure than it had after past conflicts.

As a result, these extremely durable and well-constructed “temporary” facilities have ended up serving generations of U.S. Army soldiers, to include myself, for almost 70 years since the end of World War II. Generations of U.S. soldiers – regular, reserve and National Guard – have lived in these buildings before deploying to the battlefields of Western Europe, South Pacific, Korea, Vietnam, Panama, Iraq and Afghanistan. I am certain that many readers of this article have spent time in these structures and have many fond memories of them.



ROTC Cadet, Myles “Mike” Grant, inside his barracks after a field exercise, North Fort Lewis, WA, July 1985.

Sources:

Alan Archambault, “Images of America, Fort Lewis,” Arcadia Books, April 2002.
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PFC Alan Archambault, left, stands with a fellow soldier outside his barracks, Fort Belvoir, VA, Feb 1970.

These structures loom large in the memories of millions of present day Americans, for whom military service was a central, formative experience. From the perspective of social history – defined as history that concentrates upon the social, economic, and cultural institutions of a people – these buildings help document the historical experiences of “ordinary” citizen-soldiers as opposed to the achievements of great military leaders. These simple structures are as historically important as any designated historic monument. From the perspective of architectural history, the war mobilization buildings are significant for their design, construction and technological innovation. Techniques such as the standardization of plans, prefabrication of units, and assembly-line approach to construction were largely pioneered in the construction of these mobilization structures. As of this writing, the last surviving remnants of the once sprawling complex of World War II barracks on JBLM Lewis North (formerly North Fort Lewis) are being deconstructed and their legacy will soon fade into history.



Barracks deconstructed on JBLM Lewis North, July 2019.

WE REMEMBER

From the President Marisa Peloquin

I am honored to be part of an organization that is so rich in volunteer talent. With only two full time staff, the Museum relies on a small group of dedicated volunteers, some of whom have contributed thousands of hours over decades. It is with a heavy heart that I announce the passing of two of our Friends.

Mrs. Marion Sydenham Ball served as the Cannon Shop manager from 1987 until 2008. Marion logged thousands of hours of volunteer service at the Fort Lewis Military Museum and was inducted into the "Fort Lewis Hall of Fame," becoming the first woman and non-politician so honored. At the most recent Friends Brunch, we celebrated Marion's 96th birthday. She passed away in her home on January 24th and will be dearly missed.

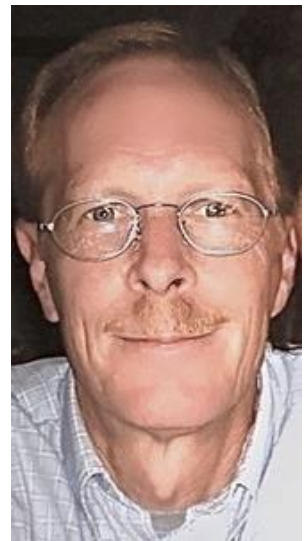


Lieutenant Marion Sydenham, United States Army Nurse Corps



Sergeant Major (Retired) Harry Schreiber passed away peacefully in his sleep on January 24th. Harry began his thirty year career with the Army in 1953, earning the rank of sergeant major. During his distinguished career, Harry served in the Military Intelligence and Adjutant General branches. His service included tours in Vietnam, Korea, and Germany, as well as stateside postings. Harry was a loyal and dedicated volunteer at the Lewis Army Museum since 2008. His knowledge and experience of Army heritage, coupled with his friendly and warm personality, ensured that military and civilian visitors felt welcome. Harry donated more than a 1,000 volunteer hours in support of the museum, and his experience and insight contributed greatly to the board of the Friends. Harry was married to his wife, Barbara, for over 60 years and had six children and 13 grandchildren.

Editor's Note: On Sunday, January 26, we also lost Richard "Red" Driver, CW3 (OD, Ret.), one of our beloved, faithful volunteers, when he succumbed to brain cancer. Red was drafted into the U.S. Army in 1972 from his home in rural Iowa. During his 20+ years of service, CW3 Driver served as an Ordnance Soldier, NCO, and Warrant Officer in Germany, Korea, and numerous locations throughout the United States, completing his service as an Ordnance instructor at Redstone Arsenal. Following his retirement Red worked as a civilian contractor on Joint Base Lewis-McChord. After his second retirement, Red began volunteering at the Lewis Army Museum in 2018 until his diagnosis with brain cancer a year later. The joy of discovery never dimmed for him as he patiently assisted in the inventory, assessment, and re-housing of over 1,000 historical artifacts. He generously gave many hours of his time each week to the museum. We will miss his gentle, friendly presence, his beautiful smile, the great stories he told, and his deep bass voice.



FRIENDS OF THE FORT LEWIS MILITARY MUSEUM

GENERAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING

23 February 2020

Place: Patriots Landing, Olympic Dining Room

Time: 1130-1200 Social Hour

1200-1300 Brunch

1300-1400 Program

Our Guest Speaker will be COL Andrew “Andy” J. Watson, Deputy Commander of the 5th Security Force Assistance Brigade at JBLM. A graduate of the University of Nevada with a Bachelor’s Degree in History and Master’s Degrees in Theater Operation and Strategic Planning, he was commissioned as an Armor Officer in 1997. He has commanded at platoon, troop, and battalion levels and served in staff assignments at the battalion, regiment, division, and corps levels. In support of combat operations, he deployed to Kuwait, Iraq, and Afghanistan a total of six times. His decorations include the Bronze Star (3 awards), and other service and campaign medals/ribbons. He lives in Steilacoom with his wife and three children.

Return this reservation form to LTC (Ret) Donald A Simpson, 827 Aloha Street Edmunds, WA 98020 with your check payable to “The Friends” by Tuesday, February 18, 2020.

NOTE THE NEW

Cost of Brunch for members and guests: **\$19.00** each.

Last minute reservations may be made by calling
Paul Knoop at (253) 279-2598.

Number of Reservations: _____ Total Amount Enclosed: _____

Name of Member: _____ Telephone Number: _____

Names of Guests: _____

Residents of Patriot’s Landing do not need to make payment for the meeting,
but are requested to make reservations for seating.

The Friends of the Fort Lewis Military Museum Board of Directors

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ROTC Cadets wait in their World War II Series 700 barracks for a critique from their Tac Officer on their performance during a field exercise, North Fort Lewis, July 1985.

Visit the Friends web site for more
 information and purchases from the Cannon
 Shop.

<http://fortlewismuseum.com>

**Friends of the Fort Lewis
 Military Museum
 PO Box 331001
 JBLM, WA 98433-1001**

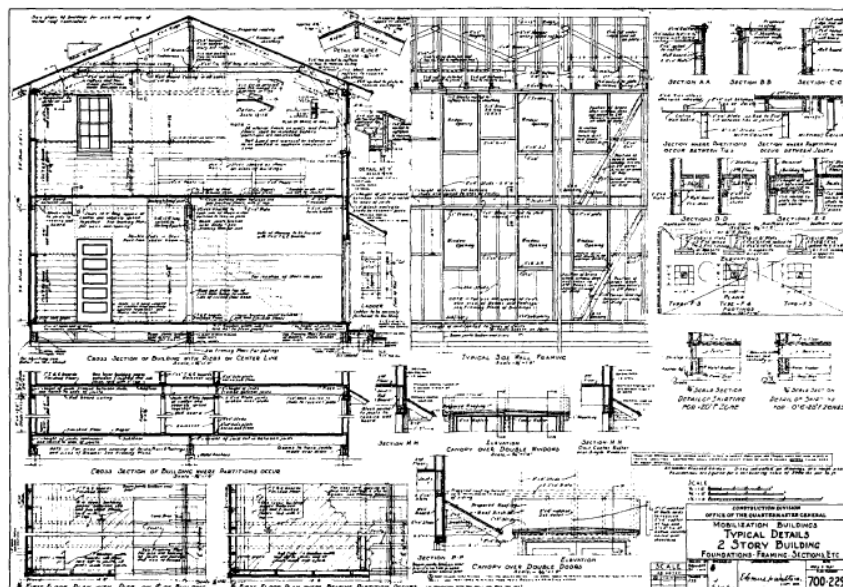


Figure 3.10. Series 700 Mobilization Building: Typical Details, 1937-1940. (Source: USACERL archives.)