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On a reconnaissance mission to Ft. Ord in Monterey Bay

Ft. Ord in Monterey Bay, where Army soldiers once trained for war, remains a work in progress after it was decommissioned in 1994.

By Susan Spano

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MONTEREY BAY, Calif. — Along Highway 1 between Marina and Seaside, it's all roller-coastering sand dunes and chaparral. There the road cuts across Ft. Ord, where soldiers trained for almost every war the U.S. Army waged in the 20th century, as well as deployments to Panama and the 1992 L.A. riots. advertisement

Then Ft. Ord closed and it was over. In 1994, 36,000 soldiers and their families were relocated, emptying hospitals, barracks, chapels, stockades and 28,000 prime Central Coast acres. Alas, the Army left something behind: unexploded ordnance, contaminated groundwater and hazardous waste.

Two decades later, the cleanup job is far from finished. A state park, national monument and branch of the California State University system moved into areas where remediation was completed. But on top of the ongoing cleanup, the recession and conflicting ideas about how the area should be used have left decommissioned Ft. Ord a work in progress. For now, at least, much of the old fort looks as wild and undeveloped as Baja Mexico, with chapters of its past hidden in dilapidated buildings and earthworks.

To do a reconnaissance, exit Highway 1 on Lightfighter Drive, starting at Ft. Ord Dunes State Park, covering almost 1,000 acres west of the road overlooking the wide, pearly scallop of Monterey Bay. The park recently completed a 4-mile trail for pedestrians and cyclists, offering access to beaches where mock amphibious landings were staged during World War II.

About halfway along the trail, signs point to the bluff-top site of a club for enlisted men conceived by Joseph W. Stilwell, from 1940 to 1941 commanding general of the Army's 7th Infantry Division based at Ft. Ord. Now demolished, Stilwell Hall had a swimming pool, wide porches, a ballroom where all the biggest big bands played and what was said to be the longest bar in California. Stand there and hum a few bars of "The Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy" for "Vinegar Joe" and all the off-duty soldiers who kicked back at Stilwell Hall.

Next stop, the main garrison across Highway 1, now partly occupied by Cal State Monterey Bay. Pick up a campus map at the Alumni & Visitor Center, then find your way to the grassy quad with a stunning view of the coast.

During World War II, the main garrison was a virtual town, populated by units assembled for basic training from all over America, headed to battle in Europe and especially the Pacific. Power lines, roads and more than 1,000 buildings originally intended for temporary use shot up in a matter of months as President Franklin D. Roosevelt saw war on the horizon.

Nowadays, the buildings on the quad look so new you wonder if the paint is dry. But many of them are military vintage, including retooled barracks that serve as dorms for some of the university's 5,700 students. The University Center has two murals from old Stilwell Hall, and Korean War vets will recognize iconic Midcentury Modern Hammerhead buildings — so named because they look a little like sharks — refurbished for educational use.

Efforts are being made by Cal State Monterey Bay faculty and the Ft. Ord Alumni Assn. to preserve the fort's history; it's hoped that a new veterans' center rising nearby will have room for a museum. But as you circle the campus by bike or car, you see eerie evidence of deterioration in the form of abandoned Hammerheads, most of them boarded up, windows smashed, slated for eventual demolition. Keep an eye out for military murals painted on the sides of buildings; my favorite is a 14th Combat Engineer insignia along Owen Durham Street, subtitled "Rugged."

Tight rows of standard, yellow-frame World War II structures, long past their expected five-year life expectancy, give the northwest flank of campus the air of a ghost town. I was lucky enough to tour the area with retired Maj. Gen. Frederick H. Lawson, a charter member of the Ft. Ord Alumni Assn., who served at the fort from 1978 to 1981. When we reached the old stockade near the intersection of 9th Street and 5th Avenue, he said, "There's nothing as depressing as an abandoned Army base."

State-of-the-art when it was built after World War II, the prison is now a ghastly skeleton, surrounded by coils of barbed wire. But the stories it could tell, especially from the 1960s, when public support for the war in Vietnam plummeted and draftees put on sandals and beads for off-duty visits to nearby Seaside. Jimi Hendrix and Jerry Garcia did basic training at Ft. Ord with no known stints in the stockade, though Hendrix was discharged before he got to Vietnam, deemed a problematic soldier much distracted by his guitar.

The town of Marina's equestrian center is nearby, encamped in the Army's old veterinary hospital, built in 1940 to care for some of the 1,400 horses and mules stationed at Ft. Ord during World War II. Tanks and helicopters replaced cavalry animals, but their romance lives on in the 1938 film "Sergeant Murphy," starring a young Ronald Reagan. And on Veterans Day, the Friends of the Ft. Ord Warhorse stages horse-drawn field artillery maneuvers and historical displays at the equestrian center. The dedicated group also spearheaded preservation of the three-mile Sgt. Allan MacDonald Cavalry Trail winding east through the national monument to the grave of Comanche, the last ceremonial horse used at Ft. Ord.

Gen. Jim Moore Boulevard takes you to the military community on the southwest side of Ft. Ord, home to two active National Guard units and housing for military stationed at nearby Army facilities such as the Monterey Presidio. A church near the boulevard's intersection with Normandy Road proudly displays the statue of a drill sergeant, dedicated in 1974, a year after the draft was discontinued, ushering in the advent of the professional, volunteer Army. But the tough old drill sergeant who made disciplined soldiers out of green draftees is a cherished fort icon.

Housing developments with hopeful "Now leasing" signs have broken ground on cleaned-up land nearby. Beyond them stretch about 6,000 acres yet to be remediated, much of it maritime chaparral, a rare habitat endemic to the region. Very beautiful, but mind the chain-link fences and danger signs, as this area is sometimes the scene of prescribed burns to deter wildfires and expose leftover grenades and mortar, rusty but no less dangerous than when they fell.

Happily, you can explore about 7,000 sweeping acres of outback, now part of the Ft. Ord National Monument. Created last year, the monument is so new that it doesn't have much signage, a visitors center or main entrance, and cleanup continues on an additional 8,000 acres, off-limits but earmarked for the

monument.

Cars are prohibited because the Bureau of Land Management's chief concern is habitat preservation, keeping the area safe for wild pigs, mountain lions, turkeys, deer and the occasional roadrunner. But a network of roads and trails is open to hikers, equestrians and especially bicyclists, who arrive by the thousands for races during the spring Sea Otter Classic.

I'd vote for getting around by bike, launched from the gate on Eucalyptus Road. About two miles east, turn on Henneken Ranch Road, which runs north through fine sections of maritime chaparral, with springtime decoration provided by pink-flowering Monterey manzanita. In about a mile, it dips to a lake bed where Kaspar Henneken, a Civil War veteran, did some ranching and built a few shelters. Their foundations are just off a sign-posted trail, as are trenches of unknown military vintage still visible nearby in a cluster of moss-bearded oaks.

David Jacks, another Monterey settler and dairy owner (who gave his name to Monterey Jack cheese), acquired real estate in the area, including 15,000 acres sold to the Army in 1917. Called Camp Gigling, the tract was used for training and maneuvers by the Monterey Presidio, constituting the Army's first official footprint on what became Ft. Ord.

It would have been something to see World War I cavalry horses charging through the scrubby poison oak and rattlesnake-infested hills then known as the "devil's own acres." A little farther along the trail you can stop at the picket fence-enclosed grave of the great parade horse Comanche, a mustang mare ridden by Sgt. MacDonald for 23 years.

To the east, maritime chaparral yields to glorious rolling grassland, cropped by sheep moved in to fatten them up and mow the lawn in the spring. Pilarcitos Canyon Road winds south to a picnic ground that was a military mess assembly where troops filled chow plates and ate standing up while training to fight in Southeast Asia. In the 1960s, the Army built a Vietnam village in and around the canyon, complete with booby traps and black pajama-clad soldiers standing in for Viet Cong. The battle conditions simulated by the training village are vividly brought to life by the 2002 movie "We Were Soldiers," about one of the Army's first major encounters with an enemy it tragically underestimated.

Vietnam vets who came through Ft. Ord would have no trouble imagining this wild, lonely countryside as a battle training ground, but it's harder for civilians. Maybe that's why uncovering the secrets of Ft. Ord is so rewarding, together with the sand dunes and manzanita.

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