

FORT HUNT - THE FORGOTTEN STORY

Visit Fort Hunt Park, in Fairfax County, Virginia on a warm summer evening and you will find yourself in the midst of several hundred picnickers cheerfully munching on Mom's fried chicken or enjoying a game of cards in the shade of the pavilion. Except for the crumbling remains of four Endicott-era batteries, the decrepit shell of an old fire control station, and an old vacant house, there is nothing to indicate that Fort Hunt's 105 grassy acres have ever witnessed anything more exciting than a leisurely game of frisbee.

In fact, however, Fort Hunt Park has been the scene of a constantly shifting panorama of people and activities which mirror the major social and political trends of the first half of this century. Seldom has one geographical area been put to so many different uses as has Fort Hunt. During its relatively short lifetime, it has seen service as a farm; a coastal defense fort; an Army Finance school; a supply depot; a brigade headquarters, an ROTC training camp; a hospital for indigent Bonus Marchers; a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp; a National Park Service exhibits lab; a monitoring station for the Army Signal Corps; a top secret interrogation center for German prisoners of war; and a film storage vault for the National Archives.

Fort Hunt's diverse history was largely the result of its proximity to Washington where it came to be regarded as a convenient plot of federal property which could be utilized for whatever short-term needs might arise. Its history is a vivid dramatization of the social trends of the early-twentieth century, from the optimism of the 1890's to the isolationism of the 1920's to the deep despair of the 1930's.

Located on the Potomac River 11-1/2 miles south of Washington, Fort Hunt was originally a part of George Washington's Mount Vernon estate. It was kept as farmland until 1892 when the War Department, as part of an ambitious nationwide plan to modernize coastal defenses, purchased the land for use as a fort. Fort Washington, a 19th century post located directly across the river from the proposed new installation, was also to be improved with the addition of eight new Endicott batteries.



Construction on Fort Hunt did not begin until 1897 when worsening relations with Spain suddenly awakened the government to the sorry state of America's defenses. Once war was declared in March 1898, 48 men from the Fourth Coast Artillery were ordered to garrison the fort, even though only one of the four proposed batteries was completed. It was not until

1904 that the total armament of three 8-inch rifles, three 3-inch, and two 5-inch rapid firing guns was finally in place.

In spite of all the consternation engendered by the supposed threats of 1898, the new guns were never fired against an enemy. In common with all of Fort Hunt's subsequent manifestations, its life as a coastal battery was short-lived. Once the emergency that had created it had passed, the new post quickly assumed the usual uneventful rhythms of a half-forgotten peacetime garrison. Even in its heyday, it had never contained more than one company of 109 men.

With the outbreak of World War I, the Army decided that Fort Hunt's guns could be put to better use elsewhere. By 1918 all of the batteries had been dismantled and the armament transferred to other forts. Though no longer needed as a defensive post, Fort Hunt remained an integral part of the newly-constituted Army which emerged after World War I. As part of a vast reorganization meant to expand and modernize the Army, all of the 30-odd service schools were revamped and revitalized. In 1921, the Finance School was given Fort Hunt as its new home. Once again, however, the changing social and political climate dictated a shift in activities at Fort Hunt.

As the post-War isolationist movement gained strength and popularity, a strong anti-militaristic mood began to take hold of the country. In 1922, Congress instructed the Army to drastically reduce its manpower, and to consolidate its functions. The Finance School fell victim to the new directives and was transferred back to offices in Washington in 1923.

For the next nine years, Fort Hunt was something of a "white elephant" for an Army which continued to reel under severe budgetary and personnel cutbacks. Except for a brief sojourn by a Signal Company, the fort was essentially abandoned. Although several local governments, a military academy, and the Department of Agriculture expressed an interest in using the land, Congress declined to transfer jurisdiction from the War Department. It was not until 1930 that Congress finally authorized the Secretary of War to transfer Fort Hunt to the Office of Public Buildings and Public Parks of the National Capital for development as a recreational site along the newly established George Washington Memorial Parkway.

While plans for the redevelopment project were being formulated, a black ROTC corps was given permission to use the fort as a summer training camp. Before they could become established, however, larger political events once again engulfed Fort Hunt. In the early Depression summer of 1932, thousands of unemployed World War I veterans began converging on Washington in the famous Bonus March. In an effort to dramatize their desperate economic plight they camped in vacant buildings and set up tent cities in empty lots, vowing to remain until Congress passed a bill which would enable them to immediately cash in their veteran's certificates rather than waiting until they reached full maturity in 1945.

Concerned about the health of the 20,000 indigent, ill-nourished marchers, the War Department suspended the ROTC activities at Fort Hunt and placed the area under the temporary control of the Veteran's Administration in order to establish a hospital for the impoverished members of the Bonus Army. Although the Bonus Bill was killed in the Senate in mid-June, many of the marchers stayed in the Capital either because they had no money to return home or nothing to go back to if they did. The hospital at Fort Hunt continued to operate through the summer, finally closing on August 12 after Congress had passed a bill to pay the fare home for all the marchers who would take it, and the Army had routed the rest with cavalry charges and fixed bayonets.

After the sobering experience of the Bonus Army, Fort Hunt was returned to the Public Parks Office and a CCC camp was established to continue the interrupted plans to landscape the George Washington Memorial Parkway, and to transform the fort into a public picnic area. In 1933, the functions of the public Parks Office were assumed by the National Park Service, and a museum exhibits laboratory with 20 CCC trainees was added to the facilities already on the site.

The CCC camp at Fort Hunt was a premier showcase for President Roosevelt's New Deal policies, and he eagerly showed it off to any visiting dignitaries who appeared interested. In 1939, the 187 camp members received a royal treat when King George VI of England, his wife, and President and Mrs. Roosevelt stopped by to pay a visit.



The CCC activities continued at Fort Hunt for the next nine years until once again an emergency situation necessitated a change in plans. With the outbreak of World War II, the Army began a frantic search for additional installations and property. Particularly acute was the need for a secure interrogation center for prisoners of war. After wasting many weeks looking at isolated country estates and abandoned hotels, someone suddenly remembered Fort Hunt. The CCC camp was quickly moved to nearby Fort Belvoir in May 1942 and Fort Hunt transferred back to the War Department for a period not-to-exceed one year after the cessation of hostilities. For the next four years Fort Hunt would once again assume a decidedly military, though mysterious, air as it was transformed into a top secret Intelligence operation for the interrogation of German prisoners of war.



The old fort rapidly mushroomed into a major installation with 150 new buildings, lofty guard towers, and multiple electric fences. The operation was so secret that even the building plans were labelled "Officers' School" to throw curious workmen off the scent. The records for the Fort Hunt Intelligence operations have recently been declassified; and, we are just now beginning to learn some of the details of the activities there. Even individuals who lived next to the camp during the war are surprised today to

learn that over 3400 prisoners passed through its gates. While they knew that it was in Army installation, they had no idea that prisoners of war were being processed there.

One of the reasons that secrecy was so vital was the simple fact that the operations at Fort Hunt were not exactly legal according to the Geneva Code of Conventions. Prisoners from whom the

allies felt they might obtain valuable information, particularly submarine crews, were transferred to Fort Hunt immediately after their capture. There they were held incommunicado and questioned incessantly until they either volunteered what they knew or convinced the Americans that they were not going to talk. Only then were they transferred to a regular POW camp and the International Red Cross notified of their capture.

The average stay for a prisoner at Fort Hunt was three months, during which time he was questioned several times a day. The interrogating officers soon found, however, that they learned more from their prisoners by listening in to their private conversations over microphones hidden in the cells than they did in the formal interrogation sessions. They were rather distressed one day though to discover that all of their elaborate precautions to keep Fort Hunt's location secret from the prisoners had utterly failed in the case of one young, well-travelled lieutenant. He was overheard telling his cellmate that he used to bring his American girlfriends down to the fort in pre-war days for a little extracurricular activity, and that he recognized the scenery from his barred window. For two German prisoners with decidedly uncertain futures, their recorded conversation sounds amusingly like that of languid tourists planning the next day's outing:

(Translated from German.)

R: The funny thing was to hear the (American) Captain say, "Now I must deliver you to Fort Hunt." Then I said, "Do you know where Fort Hunt is?" "I don't know," he said. "I can show you the way."

S: Is that the name of this place?

R: Yes. It used to be a CCC camp...I know exactly because I laid a girl out there once. A fine highway goes by there to Mount Vernon.

S: What's CCC?

R: It's something like the German Arbeitsdienst.

S: If you used to make the best of your time petting around here, you must know the region pretty well, eh?

R: Out front here, a wonderful highway goes to Mount Vernon where George Washington used to live. It's only about two miles from here.

S: That beautiful, isn't it?

R: Yes, Mount Vernon.

S: Is it near here?

R: You could probably see it, if it weren't for the woods.

S: You'll have to show it to me some day.

R: And then there is...the Potomac, Magnificent, and across the Potomac you can see Washington and here there is a delightful little town, Alexandria, Virginia.

S: We went through there. It must be an old town.

(The text above is translated from the German.)

Of course some of the prisoners quickly suspected the presence of hidden microphones and spent the long tedious hours in their cells entertaining the GI's listening in at the other end with animal imitations, obscene stories, and songs. Less discerning prisoners spoke freely with each other, providing the Allies with much valuable information on war crimes, the technical workings of U-boats, and the state of enemy morale. "Stool pigeons" were also sometimes placed in the cells to encourage particularly reticent individuals to reveal information during the course of seemingly casual conversations.



Preliminary research into these records is providing some interesting information which significantly alters currently accepted ideas regarding the German Kriegsmarine. It is commonly believed, for instance, that the German U-boat service was composed entirely of volunteers. These records, however, indicate that a sizeable proportion of the submariners, at least in the latter years of the war, were definitely not in the Navy by choice. Many were Czechs or Poles who could not even speak fluent German.

By November of 1946, World War II was over and the last German prisoner had left Fort Hunt. The combined Army/Navy Intelligence group closed down their operation and returned the land to the



National Park Service which continued to develop the site as a recreational area. All of the buildings connected with the Interrogation center were removed, and today not a single vestige remains of the walls, towers, and cellblocks which once comprised a temporary home for several thousand men. Few of the families who today enjoy picnic lunches and softball games on Fort Hunt's grassy lawns are even aware of the innumerable personal dramas which were once played out on the ground over which they walk. Bonus Marchers, CCC workers, and prisoners of war have all disappeared without a trace.

Because its history reflects so well the changing temper and trends of the first half of this century, Fort Hunt is a particularly rewarding site for political and social study. From the militant eagerness of the 1890's to the security consciousness of the 1940's, it was a living laboratory for the national mood.

Today Fort Hunt Park is a recreation area administered by the George Washington Memorial Parkway a unit of the National Park Service.