



COUNCIL ON AMERICA'S MILITARY PAST - U.S.A.

PRESERVING, INTERPRETING AND SHARING OUR MILITARY HERITAGE

presents

The Persistent Pandemic Preservationist April 2022

Editor's Note:

Welcome! I have to admit I'm not sure whether to include the word "pandemic" in our title any more – since we may have turned the corner and the right word may now be something like "epidemic" or even "endemic." But for now I will let it stand and talk a little more about how museums have responded to the pandemic before perhaps shifting to general preservation issues. In this, Volume III, Number 1 of our newsletter featuring one or more historic sites across the country responding to the challenges of the COVID-19 Pandemic, I am happy to focus on a museum that has emerged from the pandemic in good shape. It is the kind of place an old World War II buff like me hankers to visit! My thanks to museum historian and CAMP member George Cressman, Jr. for doing the heavy lifting and writing for us.

The original Persistent Preservationist was a most excellent newsletter produced by CAMP member Col. Hal Youmans, USA (Ret).

We welcome suggestions for stories or sites to cover.

— Nick Reynolds, Editor, history-maker@comcast.net

Camp Blanding Museum

By George Cressman, Jr.

The Pandemic: Located in Starke, Florida, not far from Jacksonville, the Camp Blanding Museum (campblandingmuseum.org) has weathered the Pandemic in ways that are typical of many museums. It experienced significant visitation declines during the early part of the Pandemic. Up to early spring 2020, the Museum had about 1,000 visitors per month. It closed for several months in 2020; after reopening in late summer 2020, visitation totals increased gradually and had returned to normal levels by January 2021. During the latter half of 2021, Museum staff struggled to keep visitor areas clean and disinfected; the cleaning process eventually became somewhat routine but was always time consuming. The spread of the Delta variant once again impacted visitation levels, but the Museum remained open throughout 2021. In summer 2021 as the Delta variant subsided, visitation levels rapidly increased; the Omega variant surge had only slight impact on attendance. School, JR-ROTC and CAP groups have resumed visits to the Museum.

Museum staff assist families of veterans who served at Camp Blanding in developing service records and profiles. Archive and library activities continued uninterrupted throughout the Pandemic.

The bottom line for CAMP members is that we can once again focus on the Camp and its Museum largely unimpeded by the Pandemic.

The Camp: The camp's history dates back to the early 1900s. As Camp Johnston, it started as a site for Florida militia units to train together. Federalized in World War I, it became Camp Foster, and then in World War II Camp Blanding, the post trained units during World War II: 152 units, ranging in size from Army Postal Units to "Square" infantry divisions. In summer 1943, Camp Blanding was converted to an Infantry Replacement Training Center. By the end of World War II, over 824,000 had men trained at Camp Blanding.

In addition to training activity, Camp Blanding was home to two German Prisoner-of-War compounds. A German Navy compound had 100 to 125 prisoners; a German Army compound housed 1,000 to 1,200 prisoners. Camp Blanding also managed 22 sub-compounds for POWs across Florida.

Camp Blanding was returned to the State of Florida in 1948. Since then it has served as the primary training site for the Florida National Guard, but many other units – Army, Navy and Marine Corps – also train at the Post.

The Museum: The Camp Blanding Museum tells the story of the development of Camp Blanding and its World War II service. Visitors begin their tour with an introduction to Major General Blanding, a Florida native who distinguished himself in World War I and would rise to command the 31st Infantry Division and to serve as Chief of the National Guard Bureau. Exhibit highlights include his World War I journal (as commander of the 53rd Infantry Brigade), his 1911 pistol and his command flag.

The tour continues with displays on the construction of the Post and especially training at the Post. Of the 152 units that trained at Camp Blanding during World War II, 9 were infantry divisions; there is a display for each of these 9 divisions. Museum docents will share commentary that enrich the displays, for example, which divisions were "spearhead" divisions (and where), as well as the 1942 visit of General George Marshall and British Field Marshall John Dill.

Another interesting display is a diorama of the German Army POW compound. This display has photos of the prisoners in their compound along with notes, sketches and drawings from a German soldier who was imprisoned in the compound.

The visit continues to a section of a hutment, the principal quarters for soldiers training at Camp Blanding. Docents can share stories of life in the hutments, including the Saturday morning inspection ritual.

Other displays feature personal and unit equipment, World War II rail and ocean transportation and then continue to the Museum's rotating display area. The current rotating display describes Army Chaplains in field operations. The Museum then turns to displays on jungle fighting and a weapons wall including both Allied and Axis small arms.

The 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment was activated at Camp Blanding, and the Museum houses a display on the training and World War II service of the 508th. When the 508th PIR Association disbanded, the Camp Blanding Museum became the repository for its archives; the Museum holds a number of documents, memoirs, photographs and books on the 508th.

Following the 508th PIR display, Museum visitors enter a display on the Medal of Honor recipients

from the infantry divisions that trained at Camp Blanding. Visitors then pass through a display on the American Battlefield Monuments Commission WWII cemeteries, and are able to view a video on the history of Camp Blanding. Next visitors can learn about the role of women – both civilian and those in Army service – in WWII. This display features the story of “Rosie the Riveter” and “Millie the Mapping Maiden,” the Women’s Army Corps and the Army Nurse Corps.

The tour concludes with exhibits of German small arms, uniforms and equipment. Static displays on the Museum grounds include a variety of WWII vehicles and artillery, as well as equipment and aircraft from the Vietnam War through Desert Storm.



Clockwise from top left: The Camp Blanding Museum from the outside; a display of a “hutment” – where two soldiers lived during training in World War II; a medic at work on a World War II battlefield; and a model of one of the PoW compounds at Camp Blanding. Photos courtesy George Cressman, Jr.

CAMP is a non-profit, 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization whose members are interested in the identification, restoration, preservation, and memorialization of old military installations as well as their history and traditions. All persons sharing these interests are invited to join. CAMP publishes an academic journal (The Journal of America’s Military Past) and a newsletter on recent developments in historic preservation (Headquarters Heliogram), and holds an annual conference. Find out more at: www.campjump.org.