

Armor School Moves Operations to Fort Benning

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The Armor School left its "old Kentucky home" in 2011 and relocated to Fort Benning, GA, from Fort Knox, KY, joining the U.S. Army Infantry School to form the Maneuver Center of Excellence.

The move transferred more than 7,500 Soldiers and 500,000 pieces of equipment to new facilities at Harmony Church. The move was part of the base realignment and closure initiative and supported the overarching concept that since infantry and armor fight together, they should live and train together.

Fort Knox had been Armor's home since 1940, but the move to Fort Benning was actually a return of sorts. "The Armor Center will cease to exist in one week," said Army Vice Chief of Staff GEN Peter Chiarelli at the Armor Warfighting Conference in May 2010 at Fort Knox. "It's a bittersweet occasion for many of us. But I would remind you that the tank school was at Fort Benning from 1932 to 1938, so we are really just reclaiming what was ours.

"Some of you are concerned that the Armor Branch is dead, but I assure you that Armor Branch is alive and well," Chiarelli said. "It's a key element of the MCoE. At the MCoE, we will train as we fight – together – just as we win together."

"We've been waiting a long time to merge armor and infantry and get the folks down here from Knox," said MG Robert Brown, the MCoE and Fort Benning commanding general. "We fight together, so it's pretty awesome we're here together. We can do so much more together."



Figure 1. COL Marshall Dougherty, left, and CSM Edward Mitchell uncase the 316th Cavalry Brigade colors June 24, 2011, in a ceremony on Brave Rifles Field at Harmony Church, Fort Benning, GA, as the unit begins to make its home at a new post. (*U.S. Army photo*)

Storied history

Fort Knox hosted a departure ceremony in June 2011 marking the departure of the Armor School and its units 194th Armored Brigade and 316th Cavalry Brigade, which were leaving to join other armor elements already at Fort Benning. MG Terry Tucker, 40th Chief of Armor, said there that the Tank Corps was established in 1918 and changed the American way of war forever, but the roots and heritage of armor go back much farther.

"We were born from the great mounted infantry dragoons of 1832, forged as light cavalry during the Civil War and honed during the late 1800s on the Western Plains," said Tucker.

The notion of combined-arms maneuver and wide-area security are not new concepts, he added, but a return to the principles learned by the American cavalry in the 19th Century. With World War II, the United States realized that fast-moving forces protected by armor were required to respond to the German blitzkrieg, therefore the U.S. Armor force was established at Fort Knox in 1940.

New construction

Fort Benning prepared for the arrival of Armor School Soldiers by constructing state-of-the-art barracks, dining facilities, headquarters and instructional and maintenance facilities. With the many improvements made at Fort Benning, including 140 miles of roads and tank trails, it is now the largest Army training installation in the world.

“More than 5 million square feet of new building space, eight bridges, 200 miles of roads and trails, and 19 ranges were constructed to meet the specialized needs of armor Soldiers and their critical requirements,” said George Condoyiannis, area engineer for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ Savannah District construction program. The Corps of Engineers completed the \$1.5 billion construction program, mostly in the Harmony Church training area, in preparation for the Soldiers’ arrival.

For example, the new Bradley Vehicle-Maintenance Instruction Facility boasts 138,534 square feet of instructional space; a 10,000 square-foot technical library; 58 vehicle instruction bays; 20 hands-on turret training bays; 14 live engine bays; and six multipurpose classrooms equipped with the latest teaching technology.

Multi-staged move

The move occurred in stages over several years. The first Armor School tanks reached Fort Benning soil in August 2010 when five M1A2 Abrams System Enhancement Package tanks arrived to use in validating the new digital tank range.

Joe Massouda, MCoE support-operations officer, said the tanks were the first of 188 operational tanks transferred from Fort Knox as part of the Armor School’s relocation under BRAC.

SFC Vernon Prohaska, liaison officer for the Armor School’s strategic-plans cell, said the range tests were to validate what the tanks see and where their weapons systems are aimed. The digital range, located east of the Malone complexes, was under construction for seven years.

Another milestone occurred in January 2011 with the launch of the Armor School’s first class at Harmony Church. At a ceremony in the Bradley VMIF’s main bay, the MCoE formally kicked off the M2/M3 Bradley Fighting Vehicle System Maintainer Course and activated Company F, 3rd Battalion, 81st Armor Regiment, which is directing advanced individual training for Bradley maintainers. The event featured a “christening” of the VMIF to symbolize the training function’s transfer from Fort Knox.



Figure 2. Soldiers work in new sustainment facilities at Fort Benning. Named in honor of fallen Soldier PFC Jesse D. Mizener, the eight buildings on Fort Benning’s 42-acre Wheel and Track Sustainment Complex include vehicle maintenance, an engine test bay, paint stripping and paint application buildings.

“Many thought it would never actually occur and would never work, but it has happened and it is working,” said MAJ Henry Delacruz, executive officer of the battalion’s forward element. “This is so because of persistence, vision and a lot of hard work by leaders at all levels within both the armor and infantry schools over the last five years.”

Delacruz noted that George S. Patton, then a colonel, commanded 2nd Armored Division at Fort Benning after its activation in July 1940 and trained the unit there prior to World War II. “If it’s good enough for GEN Patton, then it’s sure as hell good enough for us,” he said.

Company F includes both instructors and students under the same command, a first in Armor School history. They were assigned to different companies at Fort Knox. The unit numbers about 65 permanent personnel and 120 trainees.

The VMIF is “the best facility for instruction I’ve seen anywhere in the world, bar none,” Brown said.

Most students in the inaugural Bradley maintainer class were in elementary school when the effort to move the Armor School to Fort Benning began. BRAC was announced in 2005, but officials said the planning went back about a decade.

The Armor School trained more than 300,000 Soldiers and Marines during its time at Fort Knox. In addition, the Armor School was known around the globe as an educational opportunity not to be missed, as 50 countries sent their armor officers to Fort Knox for courses.



Figure 3. The first class of lieutenants going through the Armor School’s Basic Officer Leader Course at Fort Benning, GA, wrap up their tactics phase. The students are from Troop L, 2nd Squadron, 16th Cavalry Regiment, 316th Cavalry Brigade. (U.S. Army photo)

Armor and Cav museum

Part of the Armor School’s training and education efforts include the Armor Branch’s heritage. “We train our Armor Soldiers about the customs and traditions of the branch through the history and vehicles,” said retired LTC Phil Linn, treasurer for the National Armor and Cavalry Heritage Foundation. “The decision was made that we would not only bring the Armor School here, but the vehicles as well.”

To that end, military and civilian developers began the first phase of construction in August 2013 for the site of the future Armor and Cavalry Museum on Fort Benning. Called the Pattons’ Park project, it will provide a continuation of artifacts displayed at the Armor and Cavalry Gallery in the National Infantry Museum, Linn said.

The foundation’s mission is to create a 100,000-square-foot museum on land adjacent to the NIM, which is located on Benning Boulevard. Linn said the site will be the Army’s largest museum complex when completed.

Pattons' Park, named for GEN George S. Patton and his son, MG George S. Patton IV, will exhibit nine tanks and other armored vehicles from World War II up to Operations Desert Storm and Iraqi Freedom, as well as three Vietnam-era rotary wing aircraft. Linn said the vehicles should be available for public viewing by Spring 2014.

The park will include a 1,000-foot trail that extends through a wooded area, a parking lot and the visitor's center located in the median of Benning Boulevard that will provide a layout of the park and direct visitors back to the NIM gallery. The foundation relies solely on funds from private donors for any construction of the site and museum, Linn said.

Pattons' Park will be temporary and dismantled upon construction of the museum in Phase 2, which Linn said is expected to be complete by 2018.

(Editor's note: This article is adapted from the articles "Pattons' Park to display 9 vehicles" by Aniesa Holmes, http://www.army.mil/article/109642/Pattons__Park_to_display_9_vehicles/; "Armor School kicks off first class at Harmony Church" by Vince Little, <http://www.army.mil/article/50548/armor-school-kicks-off-first-class-at-harmony-church/>; "Chiarelli: Armor School moving home to Benning" by Maureen Rose, <http://www.army.mil/article/39763/chiarelli-armor-school-moving-home-to-benning/>; "Armor School sends first wave of tanks" by Vince Little, http://www.army.mil/article/43803/Armor_School_sends_first_wave_of_tanks/; "Final units depart Fort Knox Armor School" by Maureen Rose, <http://www.army.mil/article/59527/>; and "New home for the Armor School at Fort Benning" by Rashida Banks, http://www.army.mil/article/71402/New_home_for_the_Armor_School_at_Fort_Benning/.)

For more information on the Armor and Cavalry Museum, visit www.armorcavalrymuseum.org.

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