WLG 2606

World War II Military Bases in West Virginia

John Wickline, WVU Extension Program Assistant – Harrison County

Educational Objectives

- Participants will learn about West Virginia's support towards the war effort.
- Participants will learn of the economic boost that military operations provided to local communities.
- Participants will learn the story of Pfc. Desmond Doss, a Medal of Honor winner who trained in Westinia.

Between 1941 and 1945, more than 218,000 West Virginians served in the armed forces, battling through the deserts of North Africa, Italy, France and Germany, liberating countries under the Nazi control and witnessing the horrors of concentration camps. Others island-hopped across the Pacific, fighting to halt foreign aggression.

But what about those left behind in the Mountain State? How did they contribute to the war effort? Several military bases and defense factories were quickly established within the state's borders to aid those fighting overseas.

U.S. Soldiers in Training at Seneca Rocks, W.Va. The going gets tougher and tougher the higher they get. Here a group of soldiers leave the thicket to begin the hard climb over sheer rock to reach the peak of Seneca Rock. Acme News Photos, 1943. Photo source: onview.lib.wvu.edu/catalog/053541

Once war was declared against the Axis powers in December 1941, the Greenbrier Resort shut its doors and, within days, became a detention center for German, Italian and Japanese diplomats and their families. Despite being citizens of nations hostile to the United States, those held at the resort were treated as regular guests. While they were barred from the golf course and riding trails for security reasons, the diplomats and their families had access to the indoor swimming pool, the lobby and they could shop in the resort's stores.

The resort staff reported few problems with housing their guests, though it was noted that the Germans were a bit overzealous in celebrating Adolf Hitler's birthday. The staff also observed that the German and Italians had tense relations, forcing the U.S. government to relocate the Italian delegation to North Carolina in April 1942. Eventually, all the foreign diplomats were relocated and the resort briefly reopened to the public in July 1942.

– continued –

However, the military still saw a need for the facility. The Army purchased the property for about $3 million and quickly began converting the grounds into a hospital for wounded soldiers. The first soldiers began arriving in November and

Wounded Soldiers at Greenbrier, White Sulphur Springs, W.Va. During World War II, the Greenbrier was used as a hospital for military casualties. Photo source: onview.lib.wvu.edu/catalog/008731

the Greenbrier was rededicated as a military hospital in October 1943, taking the name Ashford General Hospital in honor of a former Army doctor known for malaria research. The press referred to the hospital as "Shangri-La for Wounded Soldiers" because the soldiers could access the golf course and other amenities at the resort during their recovery. Between 1942 and 1946, more than 24,000 soldiers were admitted, and more than 11,000 operations were performed.

The Greenbrier hospital faced a severe labor shortage when the war was taking place. The solution came with the construction of a prisoner-of-war camp at a nearby Civilian Conservation Corps facility. More than 1,000 POWs from Europe were utilized for cooking meals, groundskeeping and laundry services at the former luxury resort. POWs assisted local farmers haymaking and harvesting crops.

Italian prisoners were housed at Camp Dawson, near Kingwood in Preston County. They were used to build and repair roads in the surrounding area and they were often received visits from Italian Americans who had settled in north-central West Virginia during holidays.

The state's rugged and mountainous terrain also proved beneficial to the war effort. The West Virginia Maneuver Area, located along the Potomac Highlands and Allegheny Mountains in the Monongahela National Forest, was used as training grounds for soldiers being shipped overseas to fight their way through Italy and some of the island strongholds of the Japanese. Elkins became the headquarters for the WVMA in July 1943. By the end of the hostilities, 100,000 soldiers received training in rock climbing and navigation through mountain passes. Encampments were set up in fields throughout Randolph and Pendleton counties and a rock-climbing school was set up at Seneca Rocks. In addition, stores and support services for the military also sprung up through the region to support the substantial number of personnel trainings in the area.

The 77th Infantry Division endured the worst training conditions among those in the Maneuver Area. They faced subzero temperatures and blizzards and their weapons became covered in ice because of the freezing winds whipping through the valleys. Ironically, these soldiers were sent to the Pacific Theater of Operations after their training.

One of the most famous soldiers to undergo rigorous training was Pfc. Desmond Doss. A conscientious objector who refused to carry a weapon, Doss endured harassment and threats of court-martial during his training. He supported the war effort, but his religious beliefs did not support the taking of human life. Doss was assigned to the Army's 77th Infantry Division as a medic. He earned Bronze Stars for his bravery during battles at Guam and again at Leyte.

In May 1945, though wounded and facing enemy fire, Doss removed all insignia which identified him as a medic because he knew the enemy would specifically target him so that he could not save his fellow soldiers. He utilized the skills he learned in West Virginia to lower and evacuate

Corporal Doss receiving the Medal of Honor from President Harry S. Truman on October 12, 1945. Photo credit: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desmond_Doss#/media/File:Desmond_Doss_CMH_award.jpg

about 75 of his fellow soldiers who were severely wounded during the battle of Okinawa. He was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his heroics, the first conscientious objector to receive the nation's highest honor. His story was made famous by the award-winning film "Hacksaw Ridge."

The mountain-climbing war effort highlighted the need for pack mules. The rugged terrain of Italy's ridges slowed the movement of vehicles transporting heavy artillery. Military leaders quickly learned that mules hauling mortars would be more effective in supporting the fighting. Training for soldiers and mules was moved from Colorado to Elkins.

One of the more unique aspects of the Maneuver Area was the messenger pigeon program. Climbers learned that using pigeons to send messages to the base was the most effective form of communication. However, transporting the birds added extra weight for climbers and created balance issues. Additionally, pigeons became a source of prey for local hawks near the rock formations.

With the escalation of the war in Europe, the Army ordered the construction of the West Virginia Ordnance Works just north of Point Pleasant in Mason County. The factory headquarters was established at nearby Camp Conley, and production began in October 1942. The plant employed more than 3,500 workers between 1942 and 1945, producing more than 700,000 pounds of TNT per day and providing a much-needed boost to the local economy. Housing was built to accommodate the influx of workers coming to Point Pleasant and other nearby towns. An elementary school was quickly set up to handle the children of facility workers. The military gave the state road commission an order to build 14 miles of road between Point Pleasant and Mason to help handle the increased traffic from heavy trucks hauling materials and construction vehicles to the plant site. The government agreed to build about four miles of roadway leading from the main highway to the manufacturing facility and the roads in and around the plant.

In 1947, the Army sold much of the land to private developers and moved the remaining explosives to another storage facility. The land became the state's top priority for a Superfund remediation project in the 1980s because of the high levels of contaminants and carcinogenic materials associated with the TNT manufacturing process found in the deteriorating structures and adjoining ponds. The estimated cost to reclaim one of the country's most polluted sites was $100 million, and the project was not completed until 2020. Additionally, the site was where the town's most famous resident, Mothman, was first seen in 1966.

Jackson's Mill was repurposed during the war years. Previously serving as a statewide camp for 4-H children, the facility proved to be an ideal location for Naval air cadets. The site had an airstrip which had been used as a private flight school during the Great Depression. The Navy agreed to enlarge the runway by 1,500 feet to make flight training easier for instructors and the

Jackson's Mill, Lewis County, W.Va. A view of the mill at Jackson's Mill from across the bridge. Photo source: wvhistoryonview.org/image/051557

cadets. The Assembly Hall was expanded to make additional classroom space, and dormitories and a dining hall were added to handle larger groups making Jackson's Mill an ideal training location.

As a result of the program, 4-H camps at Jackson's Mill were cancelled in 1943, though Lewis and Harrison counties were still able to stage their programs in the nearby livestock barns on campus. The final group of cadets graduated in the spring of 1944 and 4-H camps resumed their normal schedules again that summer.

Though many of these bases have long faded into the dustbin of history, their footprints left an indelible mark on West Virginia. The communities that housed these military installations saw an employment and economic boost as the country started coming out of the Great Depression. These facilities also provided the necessary support for a successful war effort.

Resources

"West Virginia Maneuver Area." *USDA.gov*.

Whetzel, Dan. "Climbing to Victory: WWII Training Maneuvers in Nearby West Virginia –1943-44."

"Private First Class Desmond Thomas Doss Medal of Honor Winner. *nationalww2museum.org*."

"The Greenbrier Goes to War." *nps.gov*.

McDaniel, Lew. "Point Pleasant's West Virginia Ordnance Works – From Wartime Production to Superfund Cleanup Site." WVGenWeb Project.

Mountaineer Military Museum. "World War II: 1939-1945."

Jacksonsmill.wvu.edu. "Jackson's Mill was used to train Naval Air Cadets during World War II."

Bailey, Kenneth. "Camp Dawson." e-WV: The West Virginia Encyclopedia Online.

Keefer, Louis. "Italian Prisoners of War." e-WV: The West Virginia Encyclopedia Online.

Noe Kennedy, Barbara. "You Might Be Surprised to Learn What This Resort Hotel Did During World War II." *historynet.com*. March 12, 2024.

World War II POW Camp; Greenbrier County, W.Va. During World War II, war prisoners were housed at this camp on the head-waters of Little Clear Creek in Greenbrier County. The prisoners were employed to lay railroad track into a large stand of virgin timber. The operator stated that the German prisoners were the finest type of labor and did an excellent job. ca. 1941-1946. Photo source: wvhistoryonview.org/image/053323

2025