The Long Road of History Impacts Today

More than one hundred years ago, nine thousand acres of fruit trees and farm land in Maryland were converted to one of 16 cantonments established in preparation for America's entry into WWI. Laws establishing Camp Meade were signed in April of 1917. By September of that same year, the first recruits arrived, moving into wood barracks so hastily erected the men walked through clouds of sawdust as they entered.

In five months, 1200 wood barracks were built on Camp Meade in the first phase of construction to hold troops preparing for WWI.

Throughout its 100 years, Fort Meade was the home to a great many firsts, many of which were a direct result of WWI. Troops at Camp Meade were the first to receive new Browning automatic rifles, including the M1917 Browning .30 caliber machine gun.

The first women in uniform, known as the “Hello Girls,” operated telephone trunk lines at Camp Meade which connected the states to the battlefields in France. Some of the women deployed with the troops and worked from bunkers near the front lines.

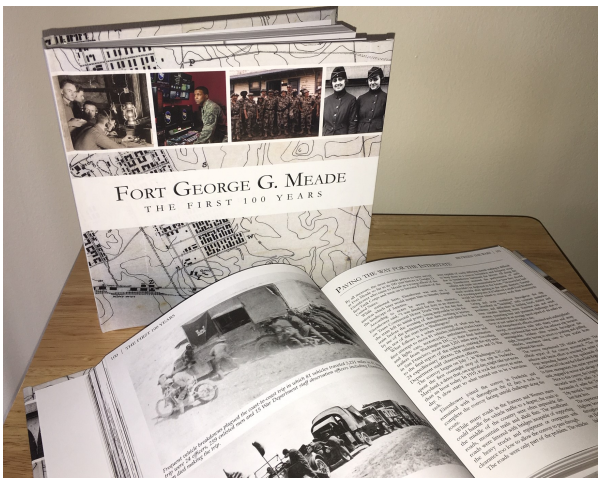
After the war, having realized that poor food and sanitation can greatly impact a soldier’s ability to fight, the first school for military cooks and bakers would be established at Camp Meade.

Also after the war, U.S. tank crews trained and equipped in France, would return to Camp Meade to establish the first Tank Crops. Among them were seasoned tank operators who had engaged in the deadliest WWI battle, the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. Under the command of Lt. Col. George Patton, 165 French Renault FT tanks from the 304th Tank Brigade, attacked fortified German positions along a 20-mile front. As leaders in the first Tank Corps, Patton, and Dwight D. Eisenhower would write the book on battlefield tank tactics, and they would practice those tactics at Camp Meade.

Eisenhower with a Renault FT-17 Tank

Today, Fort Meade is home to the nation's newest combatant command –U.S. Cyber Command, where 24/7 service members of all branches engage in conflict and competition in the firth dimension of warfare.

Despite all of these Fort Meade firsts, there had never been a definitive book written about the installation's history, until now.



A free PDF version of the book is at www.ftmeade.army.mil. *Hardcover versions are at* [*Amazon.com.*]

Fort George G. Meade, The First 100 Years is a more than 300 page book, a majority of which concentrates on WWI and the rapid construction, first arrivals, training and deployment of hundreds of thousands of men and women from Camp Meade. The pages are filled with historic photography, poetry, letters, essays and personal memories of people connected to the installation. The following is just one of more than 100 essays that trace the installations role in conflicts from the trenches of France, to the terror threats of Iraq and Afghanistan and into the current conflict platform, cyberspace.

Paving the way for the Interstate

Excerpt from Fort George G. Meade: The First 100 Years

By all measure, the most notable person to have served at Fort Meade so far in its 100 year history is Dwight D. Eisenhower who came to Meade as a young officer of the first Tank Corps and went on to be President of the United States.

While stationed at Meade, Eisenhower was sent on a mission which later would inspire him to literally change the landscape of America.

In notes he wrote describing the mission, Eisenhower said, “I was detailed for duty as an observer on Trans-Continental Motor Truck Trip on the day that the train left its initial point, being impossible to join the train before the evening of that date, nothing is known by me of the preliminary arrangements and plans for the trip, nor of the start from Washington.”

Printed in Fort George G. Meade; The First 100 Years, courtesy of the Eisenhower Presidential Library.

What follows is a sober recounting of what was the first attempt to move 81 vehicles, including trucks; heavy and light; cars, motorcycles, ambulances, tractors and trailers from Washington D.C., to their final destination in San Francisco, more than 3,251 miles away. According to the final

report of the endeavor, making the trip were 24 expeditionary officers, 258 enlisted men and 15 War Department staff observation officers. Due to his late addition, it would seem Eisenhower's orders were to serve as part of the War Department staff.

The convoy began on July 7, in Washington D.C., and spent the first overnight stop on of the trip in Fredrick, Maryland, a drive that, on a good day, might take just more than an hour today. In 1919, it took the convoy an entire day. A slow start to what turned out to be a herculean task.

Eisenhower joined the convoy in Fredrick and remained with it throughout the 62 days it took to complete the trip facing untold challenges along the route.

While many roads in the Eastern and Western states could handle vehicle traffic to a degree, the roads in the middle of the country were often impassable dirt roads, mountain trails and alkali flats. The insufficient roads were littered with bridges incapable of supporting the heavy trucks and equipment or overpasses with clearance too low to allow the convoy to pass through.

The roads were only part of the problem. The vehicles were capable of vastly differing speeds making it difficult to keep them in a convoy formation and frequent stops due to breakdowns harassed the drivers. All along the way, Eisenhower assessed the performance of each vehicle and made recommendations for how they should or shouldn't be deployed in the future. "Motorcycles had much trouble after getting in the sandy districts. Except for scouting purposes, it is believed a small Ford Roadster would be better suited to convoy work than motorcycle and side car."

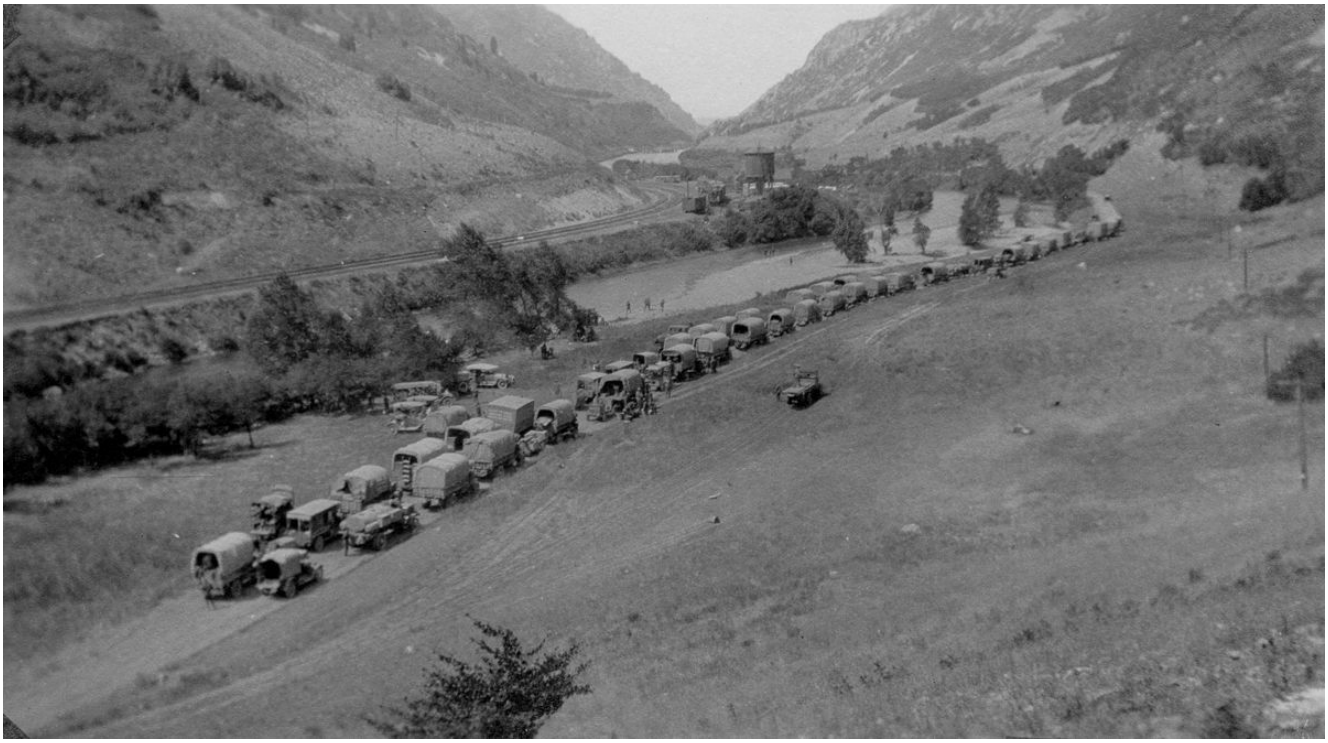


Photo courtesy of Eisenhower Presidential Library

Living and work conditions throughout the trip were described as “hardship,” with constant sanitation problems, and difficulties in finding food, shelter and even suitable drinking water. Extreme rain and wind storms, punishing heat and persistent challenges due to terrain resulted in an average travel speed of six miles on hour or just under 60 miles a day.

The convoy experienced 230 vehicle accidents. The official report of the convoy recounted, “The most arduous and heroic effort in rescuing the entire convoy from impending disaster on the quicksands of the Salt Lake Desert in Utah and the Fallow Sink Region in Nevada. In these emergencies, the entire personnel, regardless of rank, engaged in rescue and salvage operations.”

Prior to this convoy, the longest military vehicle march recorded went 900 miles. It is reported that, over the thousands of miles the Trans-Continental Motor Truck Trip traveled, “thru various casualties en route,” 21 men lost their lives.

The experience of the trip traveling along the Lincoln Highway became something that stuck with Eisenhower throughout his life. After WWII and his experience driving on Hitler's Autobahn, the importance of a functioning highway system and the role it might play in the defense of the nation hit home. Once he became president, Eisenhower made developing an interstate highway system one of the major goals of his administration.

100 Years of Fort George G. Meade is available in PDF format on the Fort Meade website at www.ftmeade.army.mil. A hardcover version is available at Amazon.com.

M.L. Doyle has served in the US Army at home and abroad for more than three decades as both a soldier and civilian. She calls on those experiences in her award-winning Master Sergeant Harper mystery series, her Desert Goddess urban fantasy series, erotic romance and coauthored memoirs which all feature women who wear combat boots. M.L. Doyle serves as an editor for The Wrath-Bearingtree.com