

BRAC: Flag uncasing signals new beginning for Fort Benning

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By BEN WRIGHT

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A historic ceremony that ended a 71-year history of the U.S. Armor School at Fort Knox, Ky., will be repeated today to signal a new beginning at Fort Benning.

Civilian and military personnel worked through the weekend preparing Brave Rifles Field in Harmony Church for the uncasing of the flags of the 194th Armored Brigade and the 316th Cavalry Brigade, the main training units at the Armor School. The flags were cased 10 days ago at Fort Knox, ending a history that dates to 1940.

The school will bring 500,000 pieces of equipment and 7,500 soldiers to new facilities at Harmony Church. When the move is completed by Sept. 15, the expansion is projected to bring 28,000 people, including soldiers, family members, civilian workers and contractors.

“It’s going to be interesting,” said Sgt. 1st Class Vernon Prohaska, a planner who has helped coordinate the move from Fort Knox.

During the 10 a.m. ceremony, there will be 50 flags, one for each state, and eight more recognizing significant organizations, Prohaska said.

About 70 percent of the M1 Abrams tanks, Bradley Fighting Vehicles and Stryker vehicles sit on a rail on post where they will be unloaded Tuesday.

The equipment includes 37 tanks and more than 20 Bradleys and Stryker vehicles. Almost all of the equipment will go to Harmony Church where it will be used in training.

Armor training and new equipment aren’t new at Fort Benning. The post’s history is steeped in training the infantry and armor dating back to 1919.

A year after Camp Benning began on Macon and Wynnton roads in Columbus in 1918, two training camps for tanks, one at Camp Colt in Gettysburg, Pa., and another at Camp Meade, Maryland, were consolidated and moved to Camp Benning.

With complaints of noise and the need for more space, the tanks were first moved south of Columbus to the current Fort Benning location before they were moved back to Camp Meade, Md., said David S. Stieghan, a historian at Fort Benning. “They really had more room out there than they thought,” he said.

While at the new location, Stieghan said arguments erupted over the future of mechanized forces.

Older soldiers were still committed to horses and bayonets while young soldiers favored the future tanks. “Eventually, what they did was take a lot of tank units and consolidate them into two infantry regiments,” he said.

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Through the 1930s, Fort Benning was still a testing ground for the Christie tank and other equipment. In 1940, the 2nd Armored Division, known as the “Hell on Wheels” unit, was formed at Fort Benning and led by newly promoted Col. George S. Patton Jr.

Patton honed his military tactics with maneuvers and training on post before he was sent to North Africa in 1942 as part of Operation Torch in World War II.

The 2nd Armored Division was later inactivated after the Cold War. With a need for training units and troops, tank units were still assigned to Fort Benning. One of those units was the 197th Infantry Brigade which was assigned to the 24th Infantry Division at Fort Stewart, Ga.

The 197th later became a combat unit with heavy action in Operation Desert Storm in Iraq.

The 3rd Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division originated from the 24 Infantry Division.

“We have the 3rd Brigade which is a deployable combat unit,” Stieghan said. “To this day, we never lost our tanks. Shortly after they started the School of Infantry, tanks were here since 1919, the very start of Camp Benning.”

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