

## The many faces of Devens: The end of an era

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Harvard — Fort Devens changed faces often in the five years following World War II. It served as a POW camp, demobilization center, and university. On caretaker status for two years, it was reactivated to support the Cold War. It then became a reception center for soldiers sent to Korea, and continued in active service for the next four decades.

More than 350,000 New Englanders were demobilized through Devens after the war, but activity there soon declined. The POW camp closed in 1946 and the fort was made non-operational, with a limited caretaker staff, that same year. Former soldiers were eager to attend college in the post war years, and to alleviate overcrowding the University of Massachusetts ran an extension at Fort Devens from 1946 to 1949. Harvard University also housed 400 families there in a Quonset hut village called Harvardevens.

The fort was reactivated in 1948 to meet the challenges of the Cold War, and when the Korean conflict began in 1950, Devens became a reception center for the third time in its history. In eight months, more than 85,000 men got their vaccinations and crew cuts at Devens, including Pvt. Edward M. Kennedy, the future senator.

The Army Intelligence School came to Devens in 1951, and held classes in Vicksburg Square. Students initially learned about message encryption, but the curriculum expanded to include counterintelligence and interrogation in the Vietnam era. A mock Vietnamese village was constructed at Devens in 1968, and Hawaiians were recruited to play the Viet Cong.

Colin Powell, a lieutenant in the 5th Infantry Division, was stationed at Devens from 1960 to 1962. While there he met his future wife, Alma Johnson, on a blind date arranged by her Emerson College roommate. Their marriage has survived him serving two tours of duty in Vietnam, rising to four-star general, and becoming secretary of state under George Bush.

Beginning in 1968, the 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne) was stationed at Devens. Also known as the Green Berets, their combat helicopters and parachute jumps were familiar sights in the Harvard sky.

By the time Fort Devens closed, it had expanded to include three separate areas: the Main Post, North Post, and South Post. Access to the Main Post was through Verbeck and Barnum gates, and encompassed more than 3,000 acres including what is now the Devens Historic District (Vicksburg Square area). There is still a military presence on the Main Post, in a restricted section called the Reserve Forces Training Area (RFTA).

The North Post, accessed through Shirley gate, encompassed more than 1,000 acres, including Moore Army Airfield. Named in honor of Douglas F. Moore, a 20-year-old helicopter pilot from Ayer killed in Vietnam, it is currently used for State Police training.

The South Post included all the land south of Route 2, and was accessed via the Jackson Gate. More than 1,500 acres of this post have been donated to form the Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge. The remaining 4,800 acres are still used by the Devens RFTA for maneuvers. The Nashua River runs through all three posts, and on the South Post it's used for amphibious training (with patrol boats and landing craft).

The 1991 Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) act recommended that Fort Devens be closed, and the Army was given five years to pull out. Officially, the fort was scheduled to close in February 1996, but this was postponed due to a 10-day visit by the Irish Naval Association.

The association arrived on March 15th, and all 156 members, including wives and girlfriends, stayed at Devens. They marched in Boston's St. Patrick's Day parade, and returned to the fort for dinner and dancing afterwards. The jovial faces of the Devens soldiers playing host to their Irish brethren was a fitting tribute to a facility that touched so many lives.

A grand era ended on March 31, 1996, as the 79-year-old fort closed its gates forever.

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