



REAL LOCAL

# FROM CAMP LEWIS TO JOINT BASE LEWIS-MCCHORD

100 YEARS OF NORTHWEST  
MILITARY HISTORY AND  
TRADITION

BY MICHEAL MCAULIFFE  
PHOTOS BY MICHAEL MCAULIFFE  
UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED

Stories and photographs from European battlefronts crowded the front page of the July 22, 1917, Seattle Times; stories like “British Airmen Bomb German Aerodromes” and a photo of American sailors firing the huge guns on a destroyer, titled, “With U.S. Fleet In War Zone.” World War I had raged in Europe for more than two years. The U.S. had joined the struggle three months earlier on April 6, 1917.

While most war news was from Europe, one

story was from the home front. “Camp Lewis Sees Rapid Growth As Supplies Pour In: American Lake Cantonment Rapidly Becoming Small City” reported on construction of a new Army camp in Pierce County.

In January 1917, with U.S. entry in the war looming, Pierce County residents had voted for a \$2 million bond to purchase 70,000 acres of land at American Lake, south of Tacoma. The land was donated to the government in return for the promise of a permanent army post—

donated as a patriotic gesture, but also because of the anticipated economic boost from the camp.

The first doughboys, as American soldiers who fought in Europe during World War I were called, marched through the gates of Camp Lewis on September 5, 1917, and began military training in the new 91st Infantry Division. Nicknamed the “Wild West Division,” the unit’s insignia of a green fir tree was appropriate, as most of the division’s men

were from Washington and other Northwestern states.

Following nine months of training, the 91st Division was sent to Europe, where it entered combat in September 1918 in the St. Mihiel offensive in France—the first troops from Camp Lewis to serve, fight and sacrifice for the U.S. Over the next 100 years, there would be many more.

## 100 Years Later

Driving north on Interstate 5 near Tacoma, a sign reads, “Joint Base Lewis-McChord (JBLM) Next 6 Exits.” The convoy of olive-drab camouflaged Humvees and trucks plodding up the right lane, and the C-17A Globemaster cargo plane in a slow sweeping climb to the north, suddenly make sense. Six freeway exits? Most cities along the I-5 corridor don’t have six freeway exits.

Camp Lewis has come a long way in 100 years. The “small city” on Tacoma’s American Lake has grown to be one of the country’s largest military installations. Since Fort Lewis, as Camp Lewis was renamed in 1927, opened its gates, it has been one of the U.S. Army’s primary training bases, and its troops have fought for our country in every war since World War I. On February 1, 2010, Fort Lewis merged with nearby McChord Air Force Base to form Joint Base Lewis-McChord, or JBLM for short.





Covering 142 square miles—more than twice the size of Tacoma—JBLM is home to Army infantry, Special Forces, engineering, aviation, artillery, medical and intelligence units, and extensive training areas and firing ranges. Two U.S. Air Force airlift wings move troops, supplies and vehicles around the globe in Boeing C-17 Globemaster III cargo aircrafts.

The base’s 40,000 soldiers, airmen and 14,000 civilian employees contribute much to Washington, Pierce County and local communities. By far Pierce County’s largest employer, JBLM brings \$6 billion annually to the state economy. More importantly, its servicemen and women, military families and retirees are residents, neighbors, friends, volunteers and students in communities like Tacoma, Gig Harbor, Lakewood, DuPont, Puyallup and Steilacoom.

Surprisingly, Camp Lewis, now JBLM, almost didn’t see its 10th anniversary, much less this year’s centennial.

#### Origins and History

**AFTER WORLD WAR I, THE U.S. ARMY SENT MOST TROOPS HOME. EVENTUALLY FEWER THAN 1,000 SOLDIERS REMAINED AT CAMP LEWIS, AND PIERCE COUNTY RESIDENTS CLAMORED FOR THE GOVERNMENT TO STATION MORE TROOPS THERE OR TO RETURN THE CAMP—CLAIMING THAT THE ARMY HAD PROMISED A MINIMUM OF 15,000 TROOPS.**

As part of a larger effort to update deteriorating military bases—and to avoid returning Camp Lewis to Pierce County—Congress authorized funds in 1926 to modernize bases that included Camp Lewis. A small article in the September 4, 1927, Seattle Times noted the camp’s improved fortunes, reporting that, “The War Department today announced the name of Camp Lewis Wash. has been changed to Fort Lewis, ‘indicating the permanency of the post.’”

During the lead up to World War II, the “permanence” of Fort Lewis solidified, as its buildings and infrastructure received major upgrades. By late 1941—just prior to Pearl Harbor—more than 37,000 men were training at Fort Lewis and nearby McChord Field. During World War II, infantry divisions from Fort Lewis fought in North Africa, Italy, France, Central Europe and many locations in the Pacific Theater.

Since World War II, hundreds of thousands of soldiers from Fort Lewis have continued that legacy, fighting in the Korean, Vietnam and Gulf wars, Iraq, Afghanistan and homeland security missions.

McChord Air Force Base is the second half of Joint Base Lewis-McChord. In the 1930s, the U.S. Army was looking for a site for a strategic air base to protect the Pacific Northwest’s industry and shipping, and selected Tacoma Field—a small municipal airport just north of Fort Lewis. Pierce County transferred Tacoma Field to the War Department, and the new air base was formally christened McChord Field on July 3, 1940.

During World War II, McChord’s planes flew

anti-submarine and combat air patrols over the Pacific Coast and the Northwest. The facility was also one of the largest bomber training bases—training B-17, B-24 and B-29 crews—and was a major transfer center for crews and aircraft heading to the Pacific Theater.

McChord Field became an Air Force base on January 1, 1948, after the Air Force became a separate military service. In the years following World War II, McChord Air Force Base provided air defense for the West Coast and became a transport and airlift base, its current mission. McChord’s cargo planes have transported troops and equipment during every war since World War II and have flown humanitarian missions that included transporting Vietnamese war orphans and relief flights after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and 2010 Haiti earthquake.

#### Location, Location, Location

One major reason why Fort Lewis and McChord Air Force Base—now as parts of Joint Base Lewis-McChord—are still vital to America’s defense, is location. JBLM’s strategic West Coast location supports fast deployment of troops to Asia and other locations in the Pacific. Its Northwest geography is another factor.

According to Erik Flint, the director of the Lewis Army Museum, “Diverse training and

deployment capabilities make JBLM unique among Department of Defense military bases.” With 142 square miles of prairie, lakes, forests, rivers, beaches and jungle-like rainforest, Flint says the Army can “replicate all of the necessary training environments.”

**KOREAN WAR INFANTRY SOLDIERS PRACTICED BEACH LANDINGS AT SOLO POINT IN PUGET SOUND. TROOPS PREPARED FOR COMBAT IN VIETNAM BY SLOGGING THROUGH MARSHES ON “SEARCH AND SECURE” TRAINING MISSIONS, AS THEY APPROACHED LUON MOT, A MOCK VIET CONG VILLAGE WITH A MAZE OF 1,800 FEET OF UNDERGROUND TUNNELS.**

Today, Special Forces Group airmen drop from MH-47 Chinook helicopters into American Lake. During infantry training exercises, eight-wheeled armored Stryker fighting vehicles bound across JBLM’s open prairie with jet-black AH-64 Apache attack helicopters hovering overhead. Desert training is hard to find in the rainy Pacific Northwest, but JBLM has that covered. Soldiers cross the Cascade Mountains to the Yakima Training Center, part of JBLM, to train in 510 square miles of shrub-steppe desert resembling Afghanistan.

The base’s proximity to deep water ports in Tacoma, Seattle and Olympia is also key for transporting military equipment and vehicles by ship. The Air Force’s 48 C-17A Globemaster III planes based at McChord Field are also vital for moving troops and equipment. Each cavernous C-17 can carry up to 171,000 pounds—big loads like 100 paratroopers or two Apache AH-64 combat helicopters.

#### Japanese Subs, POWs and Famous Generals

JBLM’s 100-year history includes many interesting stories and people. In the weeks immediately following Pearl Harbor, Japanese submarines lurking off the West Coast sank several merchant ships. Major Everett “Brick” Holstrom from Tacoma, flying an anti-submarine patrol in a B-25 bomber out of McChord Field on December 24, 1941, was credited with sinking a sub that surfaced 40 miles from the mouth of the Columbia River.

Although Holstrom received an Air Medal for the sinking, there’s some question if he really hit a submarine. The Japanese have no record of a sub sinking off the West Coast, and pilots sometimes bombed whales and oil slicks mistaken for submarines.

Fort Lewis was a World War II prisoner of war camp for more than 4,000 German POWs—many from Field Marshall Irwin Rommel’s famed Afrika Korps. According to a June 1944

**TODAY, SPECIAL FORCES GROUP  
AIRMEN DROP FROM MH-47  
CHINOOK HELICOPTERS INTO  
AMERICAN LAKE. DURING  
INFANTRY TRAINING EXERCISES,  
EIGHT-WHEELED ARMORED  
STRYKER FIGHTING VEHICLES  
BOUND ACROSS JBLM’S OPEN  
PRAIRIE WITH JET-BLACK AH-64  
APACHE ATTACK HELICOPTERS  
HOVERING OVERHEAD.**

PHOTO COURTESY JBLM PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICE







Seattle Times story, prisoners earned 80 cents a day working in the camp and could spend their pay in camp canteens or bank it until the end of the war. Very few prisoners banked their wages, still believing that Germany would win the war and American money would be worthless.

Several famous generals served at Fort Lewis. Dwight Eisenhower—the 34th president of the United States—held command positions from early 1940 until June 1941. A little more than two years after leaving Fort Lewis, Eisenhower would become the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, commanding the D-Day invasion of France. General Norman Schwarzkopf led Allied forces in the 1991 Persian Gulf War and served two assignments at Fort Lewis, including one as the base commander. “Stormin Norman’s” jeep from Fort Lewis is displayed at the Lewis Army Museum.

#### See JBLM’s History

**UNLESS YOU’RE ASSIGNED TO THE BASE, ACCESS TO JBLM IS RESTRICTED, BUT THERE ARE A FEW PLACES TO SEE SOME OF THE BASE’S HISTORY.**

The Lewis Army Museum is housed in the former Red Shield Inn—a World War I Salvation Army hotel for soldiers and military families. With its unique Western Stick architecture, it’s

the last surviving building from Greene Park, a World War I recreational area with stores, restaurants and theaters aimed at keeping troops away from the temptations and trouble of Tacoma and Seattle.

The museum, currently being renovated, will feature three new exhibits focusing on Fort Lewis and Army history. It also has an extensive collection of historic tanks and Army vehicles.

According to Erik Flint, “The goal is to reopen around July 4 to tie in with Freedom Fest,” JBLM’s Fourth of July celebration. Visitors will no longer have to go through JBLM’s main gate to visit the museum, and it will be open Wednesday through Sunday, 10am to 5pm.

The Liberty Gate, the camp’s original main gate, was built and donated by Camp Lewis construction workers in 1918. It was moved from its original location when I-5 was constructed and now sits outside JBLM’s current Main Gate at I-5 Exit 120.

#### Camp Lewis Centennial

Events are being planned to celebrate the Camp Lewis Centennial and to thank and remember the servicemen and women who have served at Joint Base Lewis-McChord during its first 100 years.

*“Diverse training and deployment capabilities make JBLM unique among Department of Defense military bases.” With 142 square miles of prairie, lakes, forests, rivers, beaches and jungle-like rainforest, Flint says the Army can “replicate all of the necessary training environments.”*

Check the JBLM Facebook page (JBLewisMcChord) and websites JBLMMWR.com and MYJBLM.CityOfLakewood.us for details as they become available.

*Michael McAuliffe is a freelance writer and photographer living in Edmonds, Washington. He can be contacted via his website at MTMcAuliffe.com.*



**AUSA**

**Voice For the Army  
Support for the Soldier**

Since 1950, the Association of the United States Army has worked to support all aspects of national security while advancing the interests of America's Army and the men and women who serve.

**Membership - Make the Jump**  
Learn more about member benefits by visiting:  
[www.ausafortlewis.org](http://www.ausafortlewis.org)



**AUSA ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE  
MEMBERSHIP 5K RUN**

FT. STEILACOOM PARK IN LAKEWOOD, WA  
JUNE 17TH 2017 AT 9:30 AM

PRESENTED BY **RED WIND CASINO**

Register at [AUSAZombie5k.Eventbrite.com](http://AUSAZombie5k.Eventbrite.com)  
Email questions to [AUSAZombieRun@aol.com](mailto:AUSAZombieRun@aol.com)  
[www.Facebook.com/AUSAZombie5k](http://www.Facebook.com/AUSAZombie5k)  
Event supports esprit de corps of the membership & the community

The Association of the United States Army, the Captain Meriwether Lewis Chapter and associated subchapters are non-Federal entities. They are not part of the Department of Defense or any of its components and they have no government status. State of Washington Charities, Registration Number 34426



**#DrinkMarkee**

**WE'RE MORE THAN JUST**  
good coffee, delicious food,  
& excellent entertainment.

**WE'RE WHERE  
YOU GO TO:**  
Connect  
Catch up  
Laugh  
Relax

**WE ARE COMMUNITY.**

**MARKEE**  
Est. 2016  
EAT · DRINK · LIVE

[drinkmarkee.com](http://drinkmarkee.com)  
[hello@drinkmarkee.com](mailto:hello@drinkmarkee.com)

**Old Town**  
(253) 302-5387  
2312 N. 30th St, Ste. 102  
Tacoma, WA 98403

**Gig Harbor**  
5275 Olympic Dr NW, Ste 101  
Gig Harbor, WA  
(253) 649-4122

  