

Calm, comotion alternated with arsenal

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My last two columns have covered the installation of the Benicia Arsenal and the difficulty commanders of the installation had in obtaining drinkable water.

While much of the arsenal's building activities had concluded by the beginning of the 20th century, its military usefulness and readiness truly would be tested during the next few decades. The Spanish-American War of 1898 marked the arsenal's first overseas supply mission, serving as a preparation for the complex war efforts of the next six decades.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the arsenal would alternate between hectic activity in supplying troops in a war theater and calm, unhurried periods. The first decade was such a calm one. Only 59 men worked in the arsenal shops in 1904, and many of them were sent on to establish long-range artillery batteries as coastal defenses up and down the Pacific Coast. The commanding officer of the installation from 1905 until 1911 was

Col. James W. Benet. Besides his military expertise, he also made a name for himself in literary circles. Among his friends he counted the novelist Sinclair Lewis and the poet Leonard Bacon, who would later win a Pulitzer Prize for his work.

Bacon later said of Col. Benet: "He knows more about English poetry than most poets - and all professors ... Merely to enjoy the hospitality of such a family in such a place was more than one deserved, and to know the Colonel, for a man of tastes, was a delightful electric shock."

Leonard Bacon also described the arsenal as it appeared to him on his frequent weekend visits, allowing us a glimpse into an idyllic setting: "It wasn't like an arsenal. It was like the backdrop of a romantic play, all pepper trees and acacias, and fountains and pillared porches."

World War I and America's entry into it on April 6, 1917, quickly transformed Bacon's poetic view of life at the Benicia Arsenal. Within a short time, the work crew grew to more than 300 men. Army posts up and down the Pacific Coast had to be supplied. In addition, three large mobilization camps, Camps Lewis, Kearny, and Fremont needed large amounts of supply. The 91st Division was outfitted in Benicia before setting sail to the battlefields in France.

Storing the large amounts of powder and ammunition had always been a risky, fire-prone business. One of the largest accidents took place on Oct. 18, 1912. A series of explosions rocked Storehouse No. 29, one of the oldest buildings, constructed in 1859 from local sandstone. A fire swept through the second and third stories, detonating 15 million rounds of small arms ammunition and destroying 34,000 rifles, large amounts of clothing, blankets and other supplies. Despite heroic struggles of the arsenal's firefighters, more than \$2 million worth of supplies were destroyed.

The three-story building was rebuilt as a two-story building. Known as the Clock Tower, for the clock installed in its west tower in honor of Col. Julian McAllister, Arsenal commander from 1860-1864 and 1867-1886, it still serves today as a focal point. The "Christmas at the Clock Tower" celebration is one of the most popular annual Benicia events.

Only 10 years later, on Aug. 12, 1922, a spark ignited another explosion. This time it was at the old barracks and destroyed some enlisted quarters and a powder magazine. Benicia residents once again witnessed shells and bombs exploding in mid-air and raining onto areas surrounding the town. Miraculously, no ammunition hit the town proper and no residents were hurt.

While the arsenal continued to be very busy for a few years beyond the end of World War I, the following decade once again saw a quiet pace and reduced activities. On May 3, 1924, Army Chief of Staff General John J. Pershing ordered the Benicia Arsenal and the barracks to be combined into one organization: the Benicia Arsenal Reservation.

The U.S. Army, including the Benicia Arsenal, was ill-prepared when World War II began in Europe in 1939. Among the efforts to improve operations was the construction of a new deepwater wharf that could accommodate four Liberty ships at the same time. One hundred nine reinforced concrete igloos were built to serve as ammunition storage bunkers. Several new warehouses were added.

Dec. 7, 1941, was a gray and heavily fogged-in day at the Benicia Arsenal. Despite near zero visibility and torn-up roads due to the construction of the wharf and other buildings, Arsenal personnel jumped into action as soon as the news of the attack on Pearl Harbor arrived.

Within 24 hours, 125 truck convoys had been loaded and sent out to fortifications up and down the coast. The first destination was McClellan Air Base with five convoys carrying \$5 million worth of machine guns.

This day was the start of a period of unprecedented activities. The number of workers

increased from 85 in 1939 to 4,535 by October 1942. For the first time, nearly half of the arsenal employees were women. Many worked in the link-loading plant, linking and belting 500,000 rounds of .30 and .50 caliber ammunition daily. In 1942 alone, the arsenal produced 42,235,000,000 rounds of machine gun ammunition.

Storing the bombs used by Jimmy Doolittle and his men in their raid on Tokyo was another notable feature of the arsenal's history. Some 300 troops from the Ordnance Maintenance Group out of Camp Stoneman arrived to ensure that the arsenal could process the huge amounts of supplies coming in and going out.

With the increasing war efforts, more workers were needed. In 1944, 150 young men from the California Youth Authority joined the workforce. Eventually, even 250 Italian and 400 German prisoners of war were sent to the arsenal.

These were the same German POWs for whom the Solano County Free Library scrambled to obtain books in German. While the POWs' mobility was obviously restricted, the other men stationed at the arsenal and at Mare Island looked for entertainment in Benicia during their spare time. Besides movie theaters, bars and restaurants, the waterfront end of Benicia's First Street was known for its flourishing brothels.

Soldiers weren't the only visitors. One of the brothels, the Alamo Rooms, included a "Mayor's Closet," a small hiding place that opened onto another room. It had been so nicknamed for providing a convenient escape route for elected officials during the infrequent police raids.

The end of World War II once again brought a calmer pace to the arsenal, at least until April 1946, when the Ordnance Field Service of the Pacific Coast was consolidated, making the Benicia Arsenal the major depot west of the Rocky Mountains. This centralization helped the arsenal weather the years of the Korean War, from 1950 to 1953, when huge amounts of supplies and ammunition had to be shipped to the Far East on a daily basis.

Storage space became the biggest challenge, despite the addition of 210,000 square feet of canvas tents to protect precious supplies against the weather. Once again, worker numbers rose to new heights, until in August 1951, 6,712 employees worked at the Arsenal. The number of vehicle trips rose to 40,500 from July to December 1950, moving more than 68,700 tons of material.

This gigantic effort came to a near standstill with the end of the Korean War on

Dec. 31, 1953. With the closing down of installations overseas and along the Pacific

Coast, supplies were returned to Benicia, once again exceeding the storage capabilities of the arsenal's warehouses.

In 1954, some 150 NIKE guided missiles arrived at the arsenal to be stored and maintained. The Arsenal became part of the anti-aircraft defense system surrounding the Bay Area. With the missiles came tracking radar stations and launching pads in the hills. The ensuing politically tense years kept troops and maintenance crews continually busy.

It therefore came as a shock to the installation when this message arrived on March 30, 1960, from the deputy chief of staff for logistics: "Benicia Arsenal, Benicia, California, will be inactivated by closeout and/or transfer of mission to Tooele Ordnance Depot, Tooele, Utah. After inactivation Benicia will be declared excess." Despite a public outcry, much lobbying and many protests throughout the Bay Area, the Benicia Arsenal closed its gate on March 31, 1964, after serving the U.S. Army for 113 years.

More information on the arsenal's history can be found in Josephine W. Cowell's "History of Benicia Arsenal," and Richard Dillon's "Great Expectations, the Story of Benicia, California."

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