

Historical Ramblings

The German Blitzkrieg of World War II illustrated that a new and more deadly dimension had been added to modern warfare. In response to this new threat, the U.S. Army sought improved training centers for the rapid development of its armored and infantry forces. After conducting a survey of the Lompoc-Guadalupe-Santa Maria triangle,

the Army acquired approximately 86,000 acres of land in March 1941. Most of the property was purchased while smaller parcels were obtained by lease, license, and easements.

The property was comprised of parts of five Mexican land grants: Casmalia, Guadalupe, Mission de la Purísima, Ranchos Lompoc, and Todo Santos y San Antonio. A sixth grant, Jesus Maria (42 acres), was transferred virtually intact to the Army. With its flat plateau, surrounding hills, numerous nearby canyons, and relative remoteness from populated areas, the Army was convinced that it had found the ideal training location. Construction of the Army camp began in September 1941. Although its completion was still months away, the installation was activated on October 5, and named Camp Cooke in honor of Major General Philip St. George Cooke.

Although the construction of Camp Cooke continued well into 1942, troop training did not wait. The 5th Armored Division rolled into camp in February and March, and the steady roar of its tanks and artillery soon became part of the daily scene.

Besides the 5th Division, the 6th, 11th, 13th, and 20th Armored Divisions as well as the 86th and 97th Infantry Divisions and the 2nd Filipino Infantry Regiment were all stationed at Camp Cooke at various times during the war. Also trained at Cooke were an assortment of anti-aircraft artillery, combat engineer, ordnance, and hospital units. Over 400 separate and distinct outfits passed through Camp Cooke on their way to fight for the U.S.

As the war progressed, German and Italian prisoners of war were quartered at Camp Cooke. The two groups were kept separate from each other in accordance with the Geneva Convention, and worked on the post at various jobs including mechanical and civil engineering services, clerical positions, food service, and the main laundry. To help relieve the severe labor shortage in the commercial market created by wartime exigencies, the Germans were also put to work in local communities, mostly in agricultural jobs.

A maximum security army disciplinary barracks was constructed on post property in 1946. Confined to the facility were disobedient military prisoners from throughout the Army. When Camp Cooke closed in June 1946, personnel at the disciplinary barracks received the additional duty as installation caretakers. Practically the entire camp was then leased for agriculture and grazing.

In 1950, Camp Cooke was reactivated and used as a training installation for units slated for combat in Korea and as a summer training base for many other reserve units. On February 1, 1953, the camp was again inactivated. Four years later, the base was reactivated as Cooke Air Force Base. In 1958, the base's name was changed to Vandenberg Air Force Base, honoring General Hoyt S. Vandenberg, the Air Force's second Chief of Staff. The disciplinary barracks was transferred to the U.S. Bureau of Prisons to house civilian offenders in August 1959. Today it is the site of the United States Penitentiary.

On July 1, 1964, Point Arguello Naval Facility, now known as South Vandenberg, was transferred from the Navy to the Air Force. In 1965, the adjacent 15,000 acre Sudden Ranch was acquired. These two acquisitions brought Vandenberg's total acreage to 98,400 acres.

In June of 2001, the final remnants of Camp Cooke, including some barracks used by the 40th Infantry Division during its mobilization for the Korean War, were torn down.

