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*Last Stop USA*

American involvement in World War II is well documented and known by the citizens of the United States. Following the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the American entry into the European theater of war seemed to be inevitable. The rest of the story is just as well known; young American men and women displaying courage and bravery in their acts of valor in defeating the Axis powers. Instrumental in this victory were the points of embarkation that these young people were sent to stay and prepare for the coming fight. Several camps were built as points of departure for U.S. troops across the United States. The largest such camp was Camp Shanks, located in Orangeburg, New York. Largely forgotten about today, Shanks served nearly one and a half million troops as their last place of residence before leaving U.S. soil. Camp Shanks was not only a tremendously important station for soldiers during the war, it also provided thousands of civilians with jobs, and later on it provided veterans and students housing. From the building of the first barrack to the camps demolition, Shanks was one of the most interesting and important points of embarkation during World War II, and provided soldiers and veterans many benefits that were not available elsewhere.

In 1942 the war was in full swing. It became clear to military leaders that a large coastal point of embarkation was necessary in order to export mass amounts of troops overseas as quickly as possible. Under the War Powers Act, the army would seize over one thousand acres of land from Orangeburg residents in order to construct Camp Shanks. Construction would occur at a remarkable pace as it would take only eight months to build Shanks at a cost of over forty-five

million dollars.<sup>1</sup> As one can imagine, eight months is not a long amount of time to transform a vast area of farmland and residential area into a state of the art military camp. The construction of Camp Shanks was a 24 hour a day job that persisted even through temperatures dipping below zero.<sup>2</sup>

The overall infrastructure that was built at the camp was highly impressive. Sewers were built with full outflow systems, a water supply just for the camp, a ferry slip, roads, and housing for over 50,000 people.<sup>3</sup> The man in charge of building this city was Bernard Rosen, an Architect and the ranking civilian construction supervisor. Under his watch the purchase of all the materials for the camp was executed and it was Rosen's job to make sure that there were no waste of materials or any of the government's money.<sup>4</sup> The construction of Shanks proved to be a very strenuous task that required a vast labor force working around the clock. Perhaps the most amazing thing about the camp is the fact that it was built in such short order in harsh conditions.

War was in full swing in the European theater and United States citizens were helping fight the war by way of rations and war bonds. Camps Shanks had its own citizenry aiding in the war effort as the camp began to resemble its own independent society after construction was complete. Like any military camp, the point was to provide a center in which massive amounts of troops could temporarily live until it came time to ship them overseas. As alluded to above, the amount of men who passed through Shanks was quite impressive for any era. On its busiest day, nearly thirty-thousand GIs were processed and sent out. The average time spent at Shanks for a soldier was around one week, however some stays were known to be as short as one day.<sup>5</sup> This

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<sup>1</sup> Scott E. Webber, *Camp Shanks and Shanks Village*, (Rockland: The Historical Society of Rockland County, 1991), 15.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

did not hinder the development of several recreational activities for soldiers and workers alike a sort of miniature world was born.

To put things in perspective, Shanks employed around four hundred officers, a dozen warrant officer, sixty nurses, about five thousand enlisted men and women as well as around fifteen hundred civilian employees.<sup>6</sup> As one can imagine, there were a wealth of activities for all of these people to do and infrastructure to allow for free time. According to soldier Robert F. Gallagher, who spent time at Shanks, they were very generous at the camp with passes.

I was awed by the nightlife of New York City. The garish neon signs, jazz joints, dance halls, bars with entertainment, movies, noisy traffic, crowded streets, sleazy bars, dirty subways, outlandish people, and overall urban environment were both exciting and somewhat intimidating. While I was raised in another large city, I had been too young to participate in the nightlife there, which I am sure did not approach that of New York City. Even what I experienced in Hollywood, could not come close to matching what was going on in that dynamic city.<sup>7</sup>

The nightlife of New York City was explored by many of the enlisted and some would stay out way too long and ended getting back to camp just in time for roll call in the morning. After five days at the camp many had been worn out by going out all night.<sup>8</sup> For men such as Gallagher who were too young prior to going to war to experience the nightlife, Camps Shanks served as a sort of initiation period into adulthood and “party life.”

Celebrity visits were a common part of life at Shanks. Pianist Fannie Mae Scott played several nights per week for the soldiers. An estimated twenty thousand troops attended USO shows in 1945 with even more turning out for other shows. Several thousand used the swimming pool, many used the outdoor fields for recreational activities such as baseball. Boxing matches

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Robert F. Gallagher, “Camp Shanks and New York City,” Gallagherstory.com, accessed on April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://www.gallagherstory.com/ww2/chapter10.html>.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

also were a mainstay at Shanks as well as regular attendance at the movie theaters.<sup>9</sup> Heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis was stationed at Shanks and entertained over two million troops before being discharged from the army.<sup>10</sup>

Shanks was unique not just for its resounding amounts of night life, but also in its cuisine. Shanks was the first Army base to develop a central meat shop operation.<sup>11</sup> The system established at Shanks was copied throughout the country at other army bases. A central butcher shop was established where prime cuts could be frozen for later dates. Steak was served three times per week at Shanks which was absolutely unheard of at the time for an Army base. One was lucky to see a prime cut of steak once during a week and three was unheard of.<sup>12</sup>

Much of the day to day operations and infrastructure at Camp Shanks provided young men with the opportunity to relax and enjoy themselves in their final days before embarking towards an uncertain future. At the same time, their stay was not intended to be a leisurely one. These men were well disciplined and trained to do “grim” work overseas. Camp Shanks was so unique because of its proximity to New York City as well as its size and opportunities to experience leisure activities not common to other soldiers stationed at other embarkation camps in different areas of the country.

Camp Shanks was not just a place for young men to stay and ready themselves for battle. The Women’s Army Corps contained over four hundred women occupying around one hundred

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<sup>9</sup> Webber, *Camp Shanks*, 39.

<sup>10</sup> "Joe Louis Discharged from Army." *The Washington Post (1923-1954)*, Oct 02, 1945, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/151799530?accountid=28549> (accessed May 1, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Webber, *Camp Shanks*, 46.

<sup>12</sup> Special to The New York Times. "Camp Shanks Fame Based on Steaks." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Jan 22, 1945, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/107149881?accountid=28549> (accessed May 1, 2015).

different jobs within the camp.<sup>13</sup> The women were also afforded weekend passes like the men were and many were able to take in shows at Madison Square Garden and see New York City for the first time.<sup>14</sup> The WAC's served many functions at Camp Shanks and many recalled the amazing opportunities they were afforded during their time there. Some were able to go as far as England to work and serve before debarkation and discharge from the service.<sup>15</sup>

Let us move on now to the actual embarkation stage of a soldier's stay at Camp Shanks. Remember that these men were incredibly young and about to take a journey overseas that they very well may not come back from. With almost 30,000 men leaving on the busiest day, one can imagine this production taking a lot of time and resources for transportation, shelter, and food. If that number doesn't seem large, remember that men are not just embarking, they are also debarking. The camp saw trains coming and going around the clock as men and women were being transported across the country in order to serve. The day to day life and actions within the camp were truly a spectacle to behold.

As described in *Camp Shanks and Shanks Village* by Scott E. Webber, a soldier may have experienced something similar to what will be described now. As soon as soldiers left the train they would march to their assigned area. Staging would take anywhere between one to two days in which each individual would go through thorough examination. From there they would have their gas masks checked by going into the tear gas chamber for tests. After this, soldiers would go through a series of lectures describing various emergency scenarios as well as topics like censorship of mail. Weapons were also checked to ensure they worked properly and an individual's personnel file would be reviewed to ensure pertinent issues were all up to date.

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<sup>13</sup> Webber, *Camp Shanks*, 77.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 85.

Soldiers could then hang out at USO clubs or receive a pass to New York City or a show of some sort. The first sign of pending movement was when a unit officer was called to an operations division conference. From that point on, a common sight was to see a chaplain appear and pray for the men about to leave, and for WAC's to look on silently as the soldiers departed towards and uncertain future.<sup>16</sup> There exists several firsthand accounts of life at Camp Shanks which have been collected and compiled within *Camp Shanks and Shanks Village*.

Although it would be very interesting to discuss what battle looked like once overseas for these young men, allow us to keep our focus on Camp Shanks and look at one of the other purposes it served during the war: as a detainment camp for POW's. Germans and Italians alike were held at Shanks and waited to be sent back across the Atlantic. Some POW's even liked the States so much they would go on to stay and make their homes there, such as Horst Heinlein.<sup>17</sup> The residents of Orangeburg were outraged that there were prisoners of war living in their backyard. They commonly worried about escapes and an increase in crime that could subsequently follow these escapes. However, their concerns were levied slightly by the fact the Italians had shifted to the Allies' side two years prior to the POW's arrival in 1945.<sup>18</sup> German prisoners of war were also present in the camp and many took note of the differences between the loud, boisterous Germans and the more playful Italians.<sup>19</sup> The worst crime a POW ever committed at Shanks was car theft, but the fears persisted among residents, especially the elderly. POW's would go on to fill several job posts that the Army assigned them and there are several instances in which newspapers of the time tell of army majors raving about how good of

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 109-110.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 134.

workers the POW's are, especially the Italians.<sup>20</sup> Remarkable that all of this occurred right in the Hudson Valley, and is not well known today.

Shanks was not just a place of embarkation or for POW's to be held until they were repatriated. Thousands of men also came back to the United States through Camp Shanks. Twelve year old Polish refugee and orphan Joseph Poremba set foot on Camp Shanks after being hidden in a duffle bag by Lee Roy Ritchey, a battery clerk. Shanks was the first place in America Poremba stepped foot in and in 1951, Congress passed a special act making his entry legal.<sup>21</sup> Camp Shanks meant so many things to so many different people. Whether it be an injured serviceman's first sight upon return home, a young refugee's first taste of freedom, or a soldier's meeting point to see his family again, Shanks served many purposes and functions throughout its existence.

Most of the men who returned from war were still young men with aspirations and wants that did not involve the military. Just as many young men and women today look to attend school and start families, the same went for young men and women postwar. What use does an embarkation camp serve once the war is over? President Eisenhower had Camp Shanks turned into veteran housing units as the barracks were transformed into over 1,100 apartment units for Columbia and other college students, 300 for veterans and 75 for military personnel who needed low cost housing.<sup>22</sup> The barracks of course were not the best housing for families and students, however they were low-cost (less than forty dollars a month) and got the job done. The winters were cold and the summers extremely hot, but these people had endured worse in their lives and they would get through this as well by any means possible. These people hoped for the day to

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 197.

come where things would improve, though. Shanks village was not a place that they wished to stay, and was even nicknamed a “baby factory” and “the Ph.D. crash pad.”<sup>23</sup> Shanks village stood for twenty years before being closed in 1966 and sold to a private builder for housing.<sup>24</sup>

Camp Shanks is not at the forefront of most present day Rockland County’s resident’s consciences. When you consider the massive scale operations that took place there and their overall significance in helping the United States defeat the Axis powers, it is really puzzling as to why this may be the case. We do not always think of this country as host to POW’s, and residents of the Hudson Valley and localized areas generally do not realize or know that German and Italian prisoners of war were housed right in their “backyards” years prior. It seems to have escaped the collective memory of Hudson Valley residents and Camp Shanks no longer fits into the identities of those still in the area. Its construction was remarkable in itself, having being completed in such a small amount of time. Its daily operations are remarkable in that so many people poured so many hours and labor into making sure that the camp functioned at a high level day in and day out. Over one million passed through Camp Shanks in some capacity and the history of the camp is preserved in a few printed sources and in the memories of those who have a link to the Camp whether direct or secondhand. Camp Shanks was created in an instant and gone in another, but its importance cannot be overstated. It can be argued that Camp Shanks and Shanks Village were the very beginning of a switch in how people lived and made their livings in the Hudson Valley as the camp would be torn down when the Palisades Parkway and the Tappan Zee Bridge were built.<sup>25</sup> “Last Stop USA” was for millions of young men the last place

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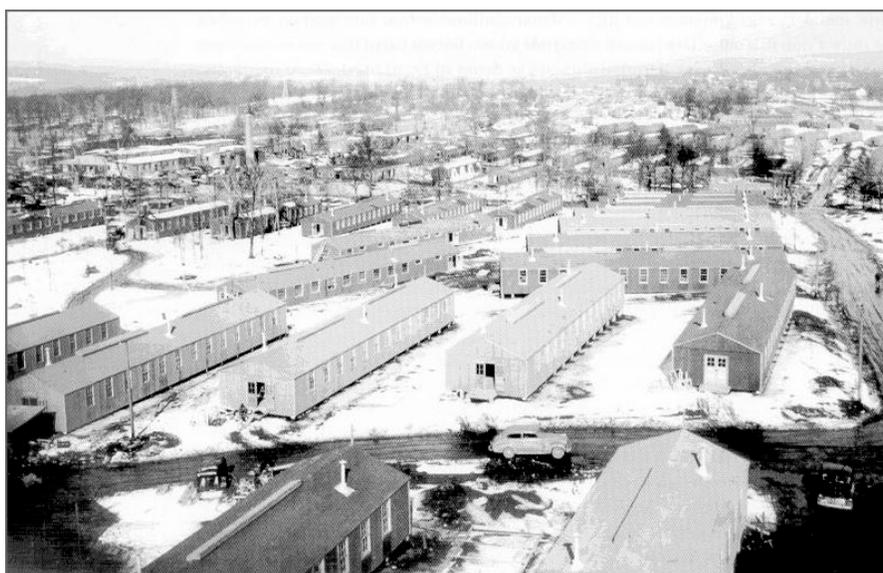
<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> David Levine, “Remembering Camp Shanks,” hvmag.com, accessed on April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2015, <http://www.hvmag.com/Hudson-Valley-Magazine/September-2010/Remembering-Camp-Shanks/>.

they would sleep while on American soil, and for others the first place they would step foot upon return, and we have the privilege of it being right here in the Hudson Valley.

There are only a few small monuments in Orangeburg that signify and acknowledge Camp Shanks. There are but two monuments dedicated to Shanks that are located near the original site. The Camp Shanks monument is one of a soldier and includes an engraving about the Camp and when it functioned. [The Camp Shanks Museum](#) includes artefacts and maps of the camp as well as other information about the site. One can visit the museum from Memorial Day through Labor Day from 12-4, admission is free.



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