

Camp Kilmer

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A Historical Sketch of Camp Kilmer**

Toward the end of 1941, with the threat of war imminent, the War Department chose a site located between Edison and Piscataway, New Jersey as a staging area for troops.



Camp Kilmer FDR Memorial

Construction began on the camp in January 1942 and was completed in six months. The facility covered over 1,500 acres and consisted of 1,120 buildings. These included rows and rows of wooden barracks, seven chapels, five theaters, nine post exchanges, a gym, three libraries, four telephone centers, a post office, a 1,000-bed hospital, 28 miles of roadway and about 11 railheads that fed into the main line.

The camp was named for poet Joyce Kilmer. Kilmer enlisted as a private in World War I and rose to the rank of Sergeant in the 165th Infantry. He was killed in action on July 30, 1918 in the Aisne-Marne offensive.

Camp Kilmer played a vital role as a major transportation hub for U.S. soldiers traveling to and from the European Theater during World War II. More than 20 divisions staged at Camp Kilmer before being deployed to Europe. The site also hosted various Allied units which had come into port in the United States. The units would then be processed and sent to various U.S. facilities for training. Camp Kilmer occupied one of the most essential processing and administrative posts in the United States during World War II.

During World War II, Camp Kilmer processed 1,320, 481 servicemen for duty overseas.

With the ending of hostilities in 1945, the Camp became the main center for the reception and processing of soldiers returning from Europe and the Pacific. The first returning were 500 battle casualties who arrived in February 1945. American prisoners of war were also welcomed home at the Camp. Soon the volume of troops coming through Camp Kilmer exceeded 5,000 a day, and by the end of September 1945 over 300,000 returning servicemen had been processed. In December 1945, Sgt. Melford Fabricant became the one millionth soldier to pass through Camp Kilmer.

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The massive movement of personnel through Camp Kilmer during World War II was unprecedented. From its opening in 1942 through the end of the War, Camp Kilmer handled over 2,500,000 troops heading to and from the battlefields.

Camp Kilmer operated more like a small city than a typical army facility and servicemen had access to all types of entertainments and activities. The Camp had its own baseball and football teams and hosted exhibition games with professional clubs from New York. There were 20 softball diamonds, 30 volleyball courts, and 160 horse shoe courts available for recreation.

The Camp had their own band and orchestra, and there were also dances and movies.

USO –Camp Shows put on productions of plays at Camp Kilmer, and the troops had visits from many of the tops stars in Hollywood and professional sports. Betty Grable and Benny Goodman appeared. Goodman performed at the first radio program to be broadcast from the Camp on March 15, 1945. As many as 21,000 returning troops a day would be kept entertained by the USO's eight-hour continuous shows.

Joe DiMaggio and comedian Red Skelton, both serving with the Army, were temporarily assigned at the Camp. DiMaggio autographed baseballs for the wounded soldiers and instructed personnel in baseball technique, while Skelton would make unannounced visits to the hospital to lift the spirits of the injured with his version of “laugh therapy.”

With the end of the War, the activities at the Camp came to an end and it was deactivated in the fall of 1949. It was briefly reactivated for the Korean War, but lost its status to Fort Dix as the major processing point by the mid 1950s. Camp Kilmer's last major role came near the end of 1956 when it served as the receiving center for those fleeing the Hungarian Revolution during “Operation Mercy.”

By the 1960's much of the Camp's properties and land was dispersed. Today there is a Vocational Training Center located at the site as well as housing and schools.



Movie star, Betty Grable entertaining the troops.