



CAMP SHANKS



(Last Stop U.S.A.)



By Wesley Gottlock

In the summer of 1942, Orangeburg farmers, like generations before them, worked the soil on their gentle rolling hills just west of the Hudson River. The corn, tomato, and cabbage patches continued to provide a way of life for many. However, this bucolic setting would soon come to an abrupt halt. A good portion of Orangeburg would soon go through a series of rapid transformations few could have imagined. The world was at war.

On the evening of September 25, 1942, local residents, including many farm families, were summoned to the Orangeburg School. They were informed that their properties were being purchased by the United States Army under the War Powers Act. The owners were given two weeks to vacate their land. The U.S. Army needed the property to build a camp.

Camp Shanks would become the largest point of embarkation of troops during World War II. Its name was derived from Major General David Carey Shanks who literally wrote the book (in fact several books) of

troop movement and embarkation. During World War I he was instrumental in moving 1.7 million soldiers to Europe while serving as the commander at the Port of Embarkation in Hoboken, New Jersey.

In a span of eight months over 17,000 workers constructed Camp Shanks, a facility capable of housing over 46,000 troops at a time as they awaited deployment to Europe and North Africa. The Army converted roughly 2,020 acres, including 675 acres leased from New York State, into a self-sustaining city with its own infrastructure. Displaced were farms, vacant land, and over 100 homes. It was dubbed "Last Stop U.S.A."

Roughly 2,500 buildings were constructed to provide office space, housing, and entertainment in addition to medical services and daily living needs. A staff of over 5,000 people was needed to maintain the camp. Its amenities included six theaters, several post offices, a Western Union office, four USO clubs, athletic fields, several beer halls, an amphitheater, a cannery, and several bakeries.

Camp Shanks deployed 1,300,000 troops throughout World War II to the European and African theaters of war. It has been estimated that 70% of the troops that invaded Normandy were first processed at Camp Shanks before their journeys overseas. Late in the war, returning troops, including the wounded, were received at Camp Shanks before they were discharged. By the war's end, over 3,000,000 troops embarked from or returned to Camp Shanks. In addition, 290,000 German and Italian Prisoners of War were processed at the camp.

Soldiers would arrive along the Hudson River's western bank at the West Shore Line station in Orangeburg in Rockland County. They hiked to the "secret" facility. Those arriving by ship at the Piermont pier were trucked the four mile distance. Typically, most soldiers spent between seven to twelve days at Camp Shanks. During this time uniforms were issued, medical inspections were performed, weapons were checked, and financial and personal papers



One of many directional pointer maps at the camp...photo credit to Orangetown Historic Museum and Archives. Photograph by the U.S. Army Signal Corps



Piermont Pier: where troops arrived at Camp Shanks and a departure point for many more transported to theaters of war. Photo credit to Nyack Library

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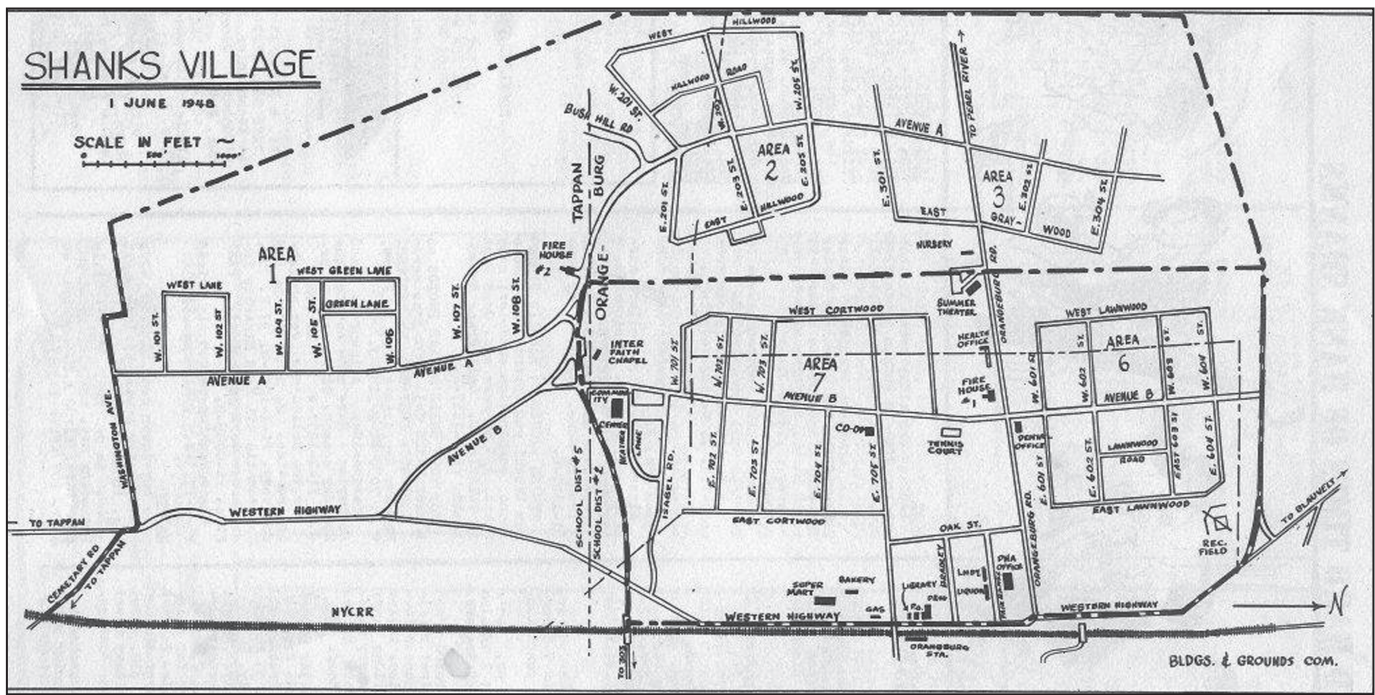
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Overview of Area 3 barrack complex (there were 8 areas in all)...Photo credit to Orangetown Museum and Archives. Photograph by the U.S. Army Signal Corps



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There was time to relax and reflect as well. Troops had myriad options for entertainment. Ball fields, a bowling center, a swim-

ming pool, gymnasiums, and lounges were designed helped pass the soldiers' time and to provide them with some respite for the serious task ahead. Celebrity performers including Frank Sinatra, Louis Armstrong, Jackie Gleason, Shirley Temple, Jack Benny, Mickey Rooney, Judy Garland, Betty Grable, and Benny Goodman spent time at the camp to lift spirits. Heavyweight champion Joe Louis, a soldier himself, was assigned to Camp Shanks for quite a time. Joe was a popular figure at the camp as he mingled and socialized with his comrades.

Professional baseball teams played exhibition games against the camp's personnel. The Palisades was the camp's popular weekly newspaper. In addition to world and camp news, the risqué cartoons were its most popular feature. It came as no surprise that many request for the newspaper came from Europe and Africa after deployment.

Because of its immense size, Camp Shanks operated four USO clubs. They were located in Nyack, Orangeburg (African-

Americans only), Tappan, and Pearl River. The Nyack USO club was a boon to that town's economy as an average of 1,500 troops visited the club daily.

As the war wound down, troops were sent through Camps Shanks before they were redeployed to bases nearer to their homes. But first they were treated to an all-you-can-eat steak dinner. Wounded veterans were treated at the camp's hospital until other arrangements could be made. POWs were processed at Camp Shanks. More than 290,000 POWs were processed at war's end before they were repatriated. The first POWs to arrive were Italian but when Italy surrendered in September 1943, the detainees were given much latitude and freedom to come and go. They enjoyed the area so much that many settled in the Rockland County area after their releases. The German POWs were not treated as well.

When the last POWs had left Camp Shanks on July 22, 1946, the War Department was left with the "problem" of what to do with the facility. There was pres-