

Camp Mackall 1943–1945

by Cherilyn A. Walley



CAMP Mackall began its ongoing life as a training center for the U.S. Army's elite in 1943, amidst the excitement and turmoil of World War II. Carved from the pine forests of the North Carolina Sandhills, just miles away from bustling Fort Bragg, the spacious installation was the ideal place for training airborne and glider infantrymen. Built in a record six months, Camp Mackall boasted a mind-boggling array of facilities: more than seventeen hundred buildings, sixty-five miles of paved road, sixteen post exchanges, twelve chapels, two large guest houses, five movie theaters, a twelve hundred-bed hospital, and enough barracks to house twenty-five thousand troops.

While initial parachute training took place at Fort Benning, Camp Mackall was where newly minted paratroopers came for advanced parachute infantry training and airborne maneuvers. The 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions trained at Fort Bragg, and the 11th, 13th, and 17th Airborne divisions trained at Mackall, all preparing for battle in the Pacific and Europe. The famous "Triple Nickel" 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion, the first all-black paratroop unit, also trained at Camp Mackall before they deployed west in May 1945 as "smoke jumpers," fighting forest fires started by balloon-borne Japanese incendiary bombs.

When peace came in Europe and then the Pacific, Camp Mackall's heyday as an airborne training center came to an end. The Airborne Center and support troops transferred to Fort Bragg in November 1945, and the camp was placed on inactive status in December. Because the camp had been built according to contingency standards, it would cost some \$56 million to make the camp suitable for a permanent base. By mid-1946, Camp Mackall had transitioned from being one of the largest military installations in the United States to serving as a sub-camp of Fort Bragg. By the late 1950s, Camp Mackall was being used for selection and training of U.S. Special Forces soldiers, a role it fulfills to this day.



Camp Mackall riggers kept busy performing pre-jump checks for the hundreds of training jumps conducted at Camp Mackall in its two years as an airborne training center.



Camp Mackall was named for Private John Thomas Mackall of E Company, 503rd Parachute Infantry Regiment, who was one of the first paratroopers killed in North Africa as part of Operation TORCH, the U.S. Army's first combat airborne operation.



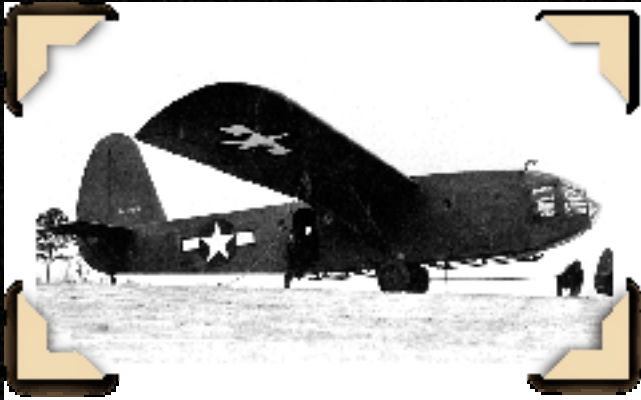
Camp Mackall was the site of hundreds of training jumps, with both men and equipment being dropped from a variety of planes, including the C-47 shown here.



This 1944 orientation booklet provided information about camp facilities and activities, as well as long distance telephone rates—a three-minute weekday person-to-person call from Camp Mackall to Los Angeles, California cost \$4.75.



With jumps occurring almost daily, paratroopers in training at Camp Mackall had plenty of opportunities to perfect their pre-jump routine. Notice the large size of the old static lines attached to the soldiers' parachutes.



As part of the Army's airborne program, Camp Mackall became the center for glider operations. Waco CG-4A gliders carried soldiers, equipment, and even vehicles, and were an integral part of Operation MARKET GARDEN in 1944.



While paratroopers took jump training at Fort Benning, they came to Camp Mackall for advanced airborne infantry training. The hunting rifles used in the former game preserve upon which the camp was built quickly gave way to carbines, artillery, and mortars.

World War II barracks were utilitarian buildings and constructed of wood. Drafty in the winter and hot in summer, the barracks were also always in danger of catching fire, requiring each barracks to designate a "fireguard" twenty-four hours a day.



Camp Mackall was home to three airborne divisions—the 11th, 13th, and 17th Airborne—and their component units, including the 542nd Parachute Battalion.



Hundreds of white parachutes dotting the sky over Camp Mackall became a familiar sight to residents of nearby towns during World War II. Early T-4 and T-5 static-line parachutes were even less maneuverable than today's T-10 parachute, causing some locals to meet paratroopers sooner than later.

Camp Mackall Station Hospital boasted twelve hundred beds and more than ten female nurses, the latter being the more significant statistic to the soldiers. American Red Cross volunteers (shown at right) supplemented the hospital staff, which also included approximately one hundred Army (male) medical personnel.



Notes:

Special thanks to Lowell Stevens and Tom MacCallum for gathering so much of the history of Camp Mackall. Other illustrations: Airborne Command shoulder patch, officer's airborne cap badge, 13th Airborne Division shoulder patch, 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion shoulder patch, 17th Airborne Division shoulder patch, and 11th Airborne Division shoulder patch.