

SHELLING LAKE MICHIGAN

THE SHORT LIFE OF CAMP CLAYBANKS

by John H. Sicard

Names such as Fort Custer, Camp Grayling, and Selfridge Air National Guard Base easily come to mind when one thinks of military bases that have called Michigan home. Far less remembered is Camp Claybanks, a modest Army training installation in Oceana County that overlooked the eastern shores of Lake Michigan during the Cold War.

AN UNWELCOME MAT ROLLS OUT

The sole purpose of Michigan's Camp Claybanks was to train soldiers in anti-aircraft artillery by firing live rounds at targets flying over Lake Michigan. Operated by the Fifth U.S. Army, the camp saw a training cadre of about 500 men instruct units of the U.S. Army, Army Reserve, and National Guard. Camp Claybanks, which spanned 434 acres of land that were leased for five years, opened to a mixed community reaction in March 1953 and closed with little fanfare in early 1958.

Rumors of the anti-aircraft artillery camp's coming had circulated for some time before an official announcement confirmed the speculation. The news was not embraced by several neighbors, including Fred H. Turner, who

fired a salvo in a letter to a Chicago newspaper: "The statement that there will be no interference with safety for water traffic is equally absurd to anyone who is familiar with this area and knows the extensive amount of commercial and pleasure travel in the Lake Michigan lanes." Worse, the gentle breezes and songbirds that Turner had enjoyed for years at his summer residence were soon to be obliterated by ground-shaking artillery fire.

Oceana County residents were likely questioning the Army's decision to establish the camp in an area that was primarily residential and recreational. Apparently, Lake Michigan was the big draw, since there was at least one other anti-aircraft installation near Kenosha, Wisconsin, on the other side of the lake. The area's terrain, water, and air traffic further made the parcel attractive for homeland defense training.

Camp Claybanks's close proximity to many Midwestern Army Reserve and National Guard units may have been another factor influencing the decision, especially considering the time. World War II and the Korean War were still fresh in the nation's collective memory, and the chilling reality of the Cold War riddled the United States with paranoia. It was a period that demanded military preparedness over the needs of a handful of cottage owners and the boating public.

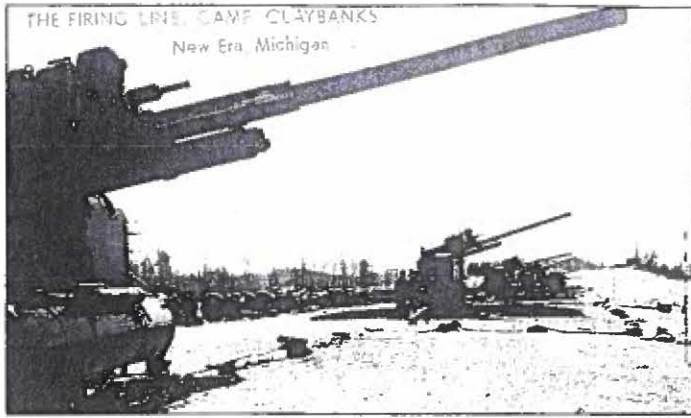
Part of the initial strain between Camp Claybanks and neighboring communities reflects a common dynamic between military installations and civilian societies. The increase to the community's economy is often balanced by an increase in noise and traffic as well as the sometimes unpolished behavior of service members. To the credit of the surrounding Michigan residents and especially camp commander Lieutenant Colonel Charles F. Hilty, both parties bridged the gap and accommodated one another.

BARE-BONES BEGINNINGS

Serving at Camp Claybanks was sometimes a demoralizing experience for young soldiers. Picture an Army



A historical map of Oceana County shows the area that hosted Camp Claybanks during the mid-1950s. (All photos courtesy of Paul Petosky, unless otherwise noted.)



The firing line of anti-aircraft weapons at Camp Claybanks.

private reporting to Camp Claybanks from a far larger base with many amenities. He found himself living, working, and eating in tents, while actual buildings and recreational facilities were scarce. The nearest community was the small crossroads village of Rothbury, about five miles east, which had little to offer a serviceman. The picturesque and more populous White Lake area, including the towns of Montague and Whitehall, was about seven miles south. To a soldier without a car, it was an isolated and lonely existence.

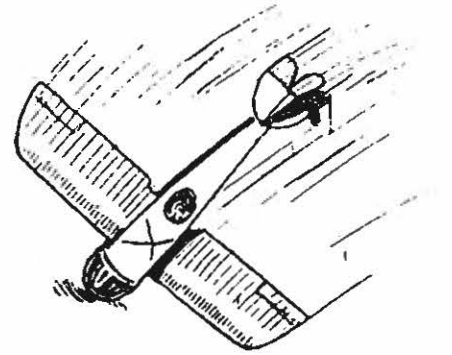
However, the outside world soon noticed and reached out to help. By December of the camp's first year, White Lake-area residents grew concerned over the living conditions at Camp Claybanks—a red flag for many was its lack of recreational facilities. The Whitehall Chamber of Commerce asked for the camp commander's input on how the town's business community could help. It is not hard to imagine that members of

the chamber who had served in World War II or Korea saw the conditions at Camp Claybanks as a reflection of what they themselves had recently lived through. Help also came from the Whitehall and Montague school systems, which offered free passes to athletic events. Area churches extended a welcoming hand with invitations not only to worship services but also to social events.

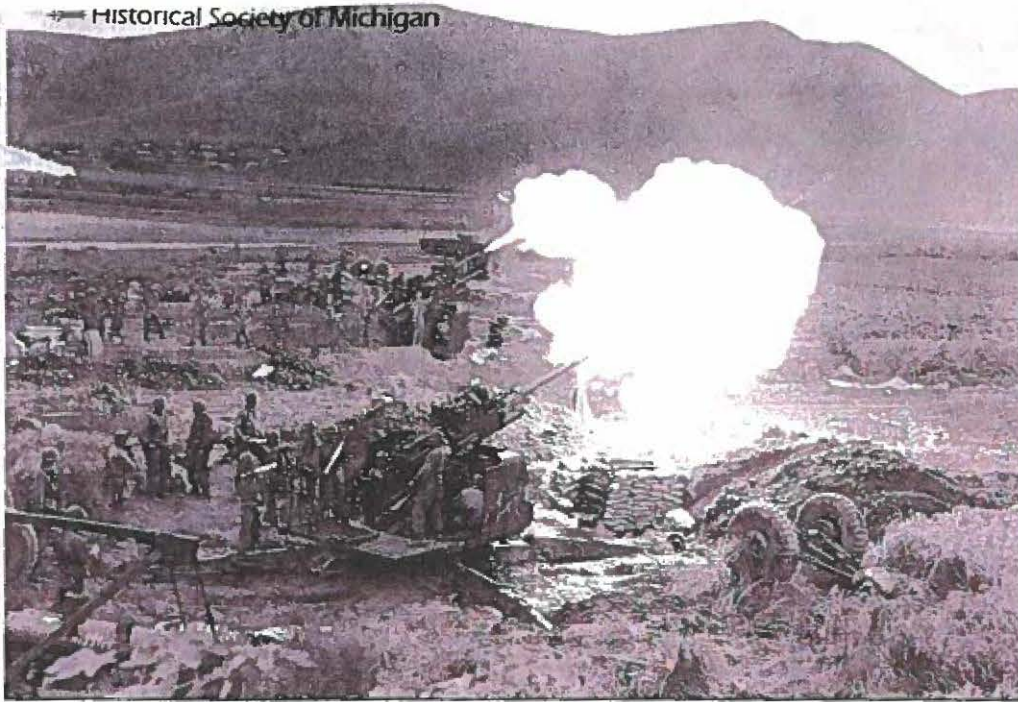
Conditions at Camp Claybanks began improving in 1954 when several buildings were added to the camp. Quonset hut barracks may have been far from palatial, but they were a vast improvement over tents. By 1955, the camp had a total of nine buildings, including mess halls, a post exchange, a chapel, and a long-awaited service club building. That same year, a motor pool was also installed and the camp roads were upgraded. As a result of the structural improvements, a greater number of troops began training at Camp Claybanks.

Radio controlled aerial targets (RCATs) were a major component of training at Camp Claybanks. Soldiers fired .50-caliber, 40-millimeter, 90-millimeter, and 120-millimeter anti-aircraft weapons at targets towed by small pilotless planes up to ten miles out over Lake Michigan. Each aircraft was 12 feet long with a 10-foot wingspan and was controlled from the ground. Since the devices were expensive to replace, they came with the caveat to shoot behind them rather than directly at them.

One RCAT was shot down in September 1954. Four sport fishermen recovered the target plane about 200 feet out into the big lake. It was dented and had a propeller broken off, and its attached parachute had failed to open. As they approached the shore, the large chute suddenly flew open, much to their surprise and struggle.



Camp Claybanks, located on the shores of Lake Michigan, as seen from above.



Many of the anti-aircraft weapons used at Camp Claybanks, like the 90-millimeter guns photographed in action during the Korean War, were holdovers from the U.S. Army's operations in Korea. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army.)

Those enhancements paved the way for the first civilian open house at the camp, which took place on Saturday and Sunday, May 21 and 22, 1955, to coincide with Armed Forces Day. Soldiers acted as tour guides, explaining the camp's operations and equipment, and many of the buildings were open to visit. An anti-aircraft artillery firing demonstration was held on Saturday while the Reverend T.M. Wright, the camp's chaplain, led a worship service Sunday morning. Parking was plentiful, and light refreshments were served. Women were "advised to wear low heeled shoes due to the sandy area and to carry a light wrap," according to the *Montague Observer* in its typical mid-twentieth-century parlance. The open house was a success and would be repeated the following two years.

was a field-grade artillery officer, a gracious host, and apparently a public relations practitioner extraordinaire. The last two served him and his installation especially well.

In 1955, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers proposed the restriction of Lake Michigan waters not only adjacent to the firing range but also below the White Lake channel. The restricted zone encompassed an area some 7 miles south of the camp, about the same distance north to Little Sable Point, and 13 miles out into the Great Lake. That did not set well with boaters, commercial fishermen, and resort communities along the lakeshore. In fact, the town of Pentwater, which was farther north of the proposed area, threatened to file a formal protest.

In spite of the bad blood, peace was achieved on a warm August evening when Colonel Hilty met with a group of commercial fishermen at the Grover Fisheries building on the White Lake channel. The fishermen had previously laid their nets in the area that was now within the firing zone. Fearing for their safety, Hilty explained that the anti-aircraft guns had to be silenced when their boats were in the area, which was costly for the camp and deprived the hundreds of troops there of valuable training time.

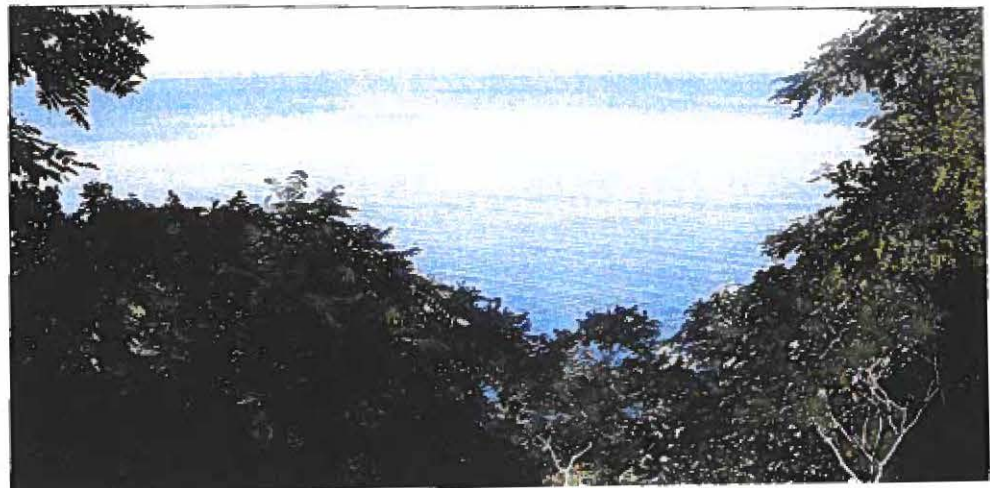
Hilty's conciliatory approach ultimately won over the fishermen, who not only agreed to avoid the firing zone but also offered to purchase and install marking buoys to warn other boaters.

Another example of Hilty's diplomacy came when he met with the Montague city council and addressed a problem—some of his men had run up large bills with local businesses before being transferred out of his command and leaving Camp Claybanks. Unpaid debts are often the bane of junior enlisted soldiers. To head off future problems, Hilty assured the merchants that he was as close as their telephones and that they could call him anytime.

A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

Lieutenant Colonel Charles Hilty, who commanded Camp Claybanks, was a man who wore many hats. He

Modern-day views of Lake Michigan as seen from Oceana County, an area of the Great Lake that Camp Claybanks' anti-aircraft gunners utilized for gunnery training. (Photo courtesy of Michael Barera.)



The shoreline of Lake Michigan stretching alongside Michigan's Oceana and Muskegon Counties, as seen from the air today. Camp Claybanks was located roughly seven miles north of White Lake, which appears at the bottom of this photograph. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons/Bjoertvedt.)

The door remained wide open under Hilty's command. While hosting the Whitehall Chamber of Commerce for dinner at the camp in June 1956, he reminded the civilian officials and their spouses that they and all visitors were always welcome at Camp Claybanks. He urged them to come especially during the week so that they could witness training.

CHANGES IN THE WIND

The year 1957 saw many tides turn. A major blow to the future of Camp Claybanks came when the state of Michigan passed legislation in June requiring the Army to obtain a permit before firing artillery rounds over Lake Michigan. That same law also required permission for beach access, which hampered the use of the camp's amphibious vehicles.

Another ominous current was stirring. The U.S. Army was phasing out antiaircraft artillery warfare as it had been practiced, converting many of its existing units into missile artillery units. That action alone made Camp Claybanks a relic. The fact that the leases on the land were nearing expiration simply added to the writing on the wall.

In September 1957, Camp Claybanks was downgraded to a summer-only training installation for National Guard units. A small caretaking crew was to remain year-round. Lieutenant Colonel Hilty was transferred to Fort Totten in the New York City borough of Queens, while the officers and men under his command were scattered to other units.

The death knell came in February 1958 by way of a terse official announcement from the headquarters of the Fifth U.S. Army, which ordered Camp Claybanks closed. All buildings were dismantled, while the camp's equipment was moved to Camp Haven near Sheboygan, Wisconsin. The men packed everything up, shipped it out, and cleared the land. At last, the curtain had come down. After training 1,200 active-duty soldiers and 2,800 reservists and guardsmen during tense years

of the Cold War, Michigan's Camp Claybanks was no more.

The Oceana County land that the camp once stood on again became private land. A few homes now occupy the bucolic area, and only remnants of concrete slabs remain as faint evidence of what was once there. ■

John H. Sicard is a retired broadcaster and history buff who lives in Grand Rapids. A childhood visit to Camp Claybanks fostered his interest in it.

