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On a reconnaissance mission to Ft. Ord in Monterey Bay

Ft. Ord in Monterey Bay, where Army soldiers once trained for war, remains a work in progress after it was decommissioned in 1994.

October 11, 2013 | By Susan Spano

MONTEREY BAY, Calif. — Along Highway 1 between Marina and Seaside, it's all roller-coastering sand dunes and chaparral. There the road cuts across Ft. Ord, where soldiers trained for almost every war the U.S. Army waged in the 20th century, as well as deployments to Panama and the 1992 L.A. riots.

Then Ft. Ord closed and it was over. In 1994, 36,000 soldiers and their families were relocated, emptying hospitals, barracks, chapels, stockades and 28,000 prime Central Coast acres. Alas, the Army left something behind: unexploded ordnance, contaminated groundwater and hazardous waste.

Tight rows of standard, yellow-frame World War II structures, long past their expected five-year life expectancy, give the northwest flank of campus the air of a ghost town. I was lucky enough to tour the area with retired Maj. Gen. Frederick H. Lawson, a charter member of the Ft. Ord Alumni Assn., who served at the fort from 1978 to 1981. When we reached the old stockade near the intersection of 9th Street and 5th Avenue, he said, "There's nothing as depressing as an abandoned Army base."

State-of-the-art when it was built after World War II, the prison is now a ghastly skeleton, surrounded by coils of barbed wire. But the stories it could tell, especially from the 1960s, when public support for the war in Vietnam plummeted and draftees put on sandals and beads for off-duty visits to nearby Seaside. Jimi Hendrix and Jerry Garcia did basic training at Ft. Ord with no known stints in the stockade, though Hendrix was discharged before he got to Vietnam, deemed a problematic soldier much distracted by his guitar.