

Camp Kohler in California first opened as the Sacramento Assembly Center in the spring of 1942 to serve as a temporary detention facility for Japanese-Americans removed from their homes in Sacramento and San Joaquin Counties. (National Archives)

RIGHT: Camp Kohler was named in honor of First Lieutenant Frederick L. Kohler, a young Signal Corps officer from nearby Oakland who perished in a plane crash in China on 14 March 1942. (*Camp Kohler Message*, Volume 1, Number 13, 13 November 1942)



CAMP KOHLER, CALIFORNIA

By Lieutenant Colonel Danny M. Johnson, USA-Ret.

Over the course of its history, the land that comprised Camp Kohler was home to a Japanese-American assembly center, an Army Signal Corps training center, a prisoner of war branch camp, an Army Air Corps overseas replacement depot, an Army branch port of embarkation, and the Walerga Engineer Depot. The footprint of Camp Kohler, located twelve miles northeast of Sacramento, California, grew from a 160-acre tract to over some 3,800 acres at its high point in 1944. Most of the land was leased from seventeen owners and returned to them between 1946 and 1974, when the Army no longer needed the post.

Camp Kohler, located on land that had once been a migrant worker camp, was built on the site of one of the fifteen temporary detention facilities designated “assembly centers” and run by the War-time Civil Control Administration (WCCA) in the spring of 1942. Known as either the Sacramento (or Walerga, a nearby railroad flag station) Assembly Center, it housed 4,739 Japanese-Americans who had been removed from Sacramento and San Joaquin Counties while they waited to be transferred to a more permanent War Relocation Authority camp at Tule Lake, California. Walerga was one of the smaller WCCA camps and operated for only fifty-two days, from 6 May to 26 June 1942.

The War Department leased this 160-acre tract through eminent domain from the owners, Dean Dillman and his sister, Corinne Dillman Kirchhofer, and private contractors built the camp from scratch. The original camp consisted of temporary buildings that were inexpensive, avoided the use of critical war materials, and could be assembled quickly. Typical barracks buildings were single-story structures measuring 100 feet by 20 feet. *Denver Post* newspaperman Bill Hosokawa concluded that the camps “provided only for the most Spartan type of living.”

Aerial photographs taken in 1942 indicate there were eleven blocks with over 225 tarpaper covered buildings. Housing blocks were engineered for a capacity of 1,000 persons served by two communal kitchens and mess halls. Within each block, contractors erected showers and lavatories. The camp had its own three-building, 150-bed infirmary, as well as laundries, canteens, post offices, a bank, dental clinics, barber shops, warehouses, recreation buildings, administration buildings, and reception areas for visitors. Housing for military police was provided in an area separate from the assembly center enclosure.

In June 1942, the Army expressed interest in Walerga because the Signal Corps could deliver only somewhere in the range of 58,000 technicians at its training centers at Camp Crowder, Missouri, and Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. That figure still fell short of the Army’s requirements for 70,000 signalmen by year’s end. There was no space for further expansion of Fort Monmouth, and any development at Camp Crowder would require additional construction. The Walerga Assembly Center had all the makings of being an appropriate site because it had space for 5,000 soldiers at once, and it could be made ready to receive trainees in under a month. On 2 July 1942, the War Department approved its acquisition, cautioning the Signal Corps that the proposed site would be just a temporary solution.

The Signal Corps took possession of the camp on 8 July 1942 and renamed Camp Kohler in honor of First Lieutenant Frederick L. Kohler, a young Signal Corps officer and electrical engineer from Oakland, California. He was one of thirteen passengers that died on 14 March 1942, when an overloaded Chinese DC-2-221 developed engine failure and crashed into a hillside. Kohler was posthumously awarded the Paoting Medal of the Sixth Order by

the Republic of China “in recognition of the exemplary services he rendered in helping the war effort of the United Nations” in combating Japanese aggression.

Bob Crist, a young lieutenant from Philadelphia, had his first view of Camp Kohler a few weeks before it officially opened. “I couldn’t believe what I saw,” he recalled. “They told me this was to be the third Signal Corps Replacement Training Center in the States. What I was looking at from the window of a bus was a collection of tarpaper-covered buildings plopped together on a small hill.” Crist added that the post bore little resemblance to Fort Monmouth or Camp Crowder.

On 28 August 1942, Brigadier General Stephen H. Sherrill arrived at Camp Kohler and took command with Colonel William S. Morris serving as Director of Training. On 1 September, the Army established a Signal Corps replacement training center, the third replacement training center for the Signal Corps, at Camp Kohler. The center opened on 15 September.

The initial 481 trainees arrived at Camp Kohler on 19 September 1942. One group arriving by train found their situation disconcerting. Technician Fourth Grade Arthur J. Sweeney explained, “Tickets read ‘to Walerga.’ The men were dumped right there and could see nothing which resembled an Army camp.” Noting lights off in the distance, they trudged about two miles over to McClellan Field, which they assumed to be Camp Kohler. Officials at the airfield gave them directions and loaned the men a truck to get back to their post.

Basic training started on 21 September. In addition to basic



Signalmen train on telephone poles at Camp Kohler in 1942. (*Radio News*, Volume 28, Number 5, November 1942)



Camp Kohler became home to a Signal Corps replacement training center in September 1942 after the closing of the Sacramento Assembly Center. Over the course of World War II, thousands of Signal Corps soldiers trained at the camp, such as these learning to send and receive Morse code messages. (*Radio News*, Volume 28, Number 5, November 1942)

soldier skills, inductees and enlisted men became proficient at different kinds of physical fitness activities. Kohler had obstacle courses, an infiltration course, and a ship net landing training apparatus. There was also a simulated French village to teach skills in street fighting. One famous person to come through the front gate was Pulitzer Prize winning dramatist William Saroyan. He underwent basic training at Camp Kohler and was later assigned to the Signal Corps Photographic Laboratory at Astoria in Queens, New York, where he created a production shown to the Army, Navy and Marine Corps.

When soldiers completed their four (later six) week program, unassigned soldiers trained to be cooks, clerk typists, code clerks, administrative and supply clerks, and truck drivers. Soldiers soon to be members of the Signal Corps began the basic communications training, which included the installation, maintenance, and operation of radio, telephone, telegraph, and teletype equipment used on permanent military installations within the country and by fighting units all over the world. As a part of the Signal Corps training, 250 soldiers at a time used their specialized communications skills learned under simulated battle conditions in the Tahoe National Forest near Sierra City, California. These training exercises lasted for five-day periods and were held in an area of approximately twenty square miles. The truck driving course at Kohler provided drivers and trucks for this field exercise.

The proposal for swiftly getting 5,000 men into training at Camp Kohler did not work out as planned. In spite of available housing for that number, sanitary and medical facility support was adequate for only 2,000 soldiers. Furthermore, Camp Kohler had no provisions for a rifle range, parade ground, or gas chamber essential to basic training. As a result, Camp Kohler would confine training to the basic courses and send the qualified men on to Camp Crowder for specialized training.

By 1 October 1942, there were 3,000 trainees at the camp, more than fifty percent over the limit initially approved. Having obtained



Soldiers listen to a Signal Corps instructor outside of their barracks at Camp Kohler. (*Radio News*, Volume 28, Number 5, November 1942)



In 1943, the nearly empty facilities at the University of California's College of Agriculture in Davis became the Western Signal Corps School under the administration of Camp Kohler. This photograph shows soldiers training at the Davis facility. (National Archives)

Camp Kohler, the Signal Corps had no desire to relinquish the site as formerly planned. With the requirements for fully trained signalmen growing, the main expectation of holding Camp Kohler lay in changing it into a unit training center. Accordingly, the Signal Corps executed such plans with a limit of 5,700 trainees, but not until January 1944. Therefore, fewer men left for specialization training at Camp Crowder and Fort Monmouth.

Camp Kohler grew rapidly into a modern military training center, transforming hundreds of men into competent soldiers. As an Army post, Camp Kohler still had a long way to go because there were still post and training facilities that had to be constructed even though contractors had been working on adding new buildings since the post was established. There was no post theater or chapel, so movies and religious services were held outdoors in an oak grove. Until the theater and chapel could be constructed, soldiers erected a tent with a seating capacity of 400 persons in the oak grove. In setting it up, they placed the main supporting poles on the outside of the canvas covering, eliminating visual interferences usually inside. The new theater and recreation hall with canteen and cafeteria were finally finished on 22 November 1942. When the new chapel was dedicated just a few days later, the main auditorium could seat 360 persons and held offices for Camp Kohler's four chaplains. A new rifle range was also completed on 27 November 1942. First Sergeant Thomas N. Johns, a member of the National Guard team which won the Camp Perry matches in 1937 and 1938, opened the range by splitting the bull's eye with his first shot.

The installation was officially dedicated on 1 December 1942, with the Army's Chief Signal Officer, Major General Dawson Olmstead, and Brigadier General Sherrill, in attendance. Mr. and Mrs. Henry H. Kohler, the parents of camp's namesake, were honored at the ceremony. Since the official dedication ceremony for Camp Kohler was closed to the public, Sacramento radio station KFBK broadcasted the ceremony on the evening of 2 December 1942.

The building program that started in the summer of 1942 pushed through in record time. By January 1943, in addition to paving streets and naming them in honor of outstanding heroes and events in military history, contractors had finished, among other things, a prisoner of war camp, a 72,173 square foot laundry, a 330-bed hospital, and

a guest house with nine sleeping rooms available for fifty cents per person and a reception room. Later, the Walerga Engineer Depot, consisting of a lumberyard with a railroad spur line from the main Southern Pacific Line was built.

Even with all the construction, it became clear that Camp Kohler still lacked enough space for soldiers needing specialized training. To accommodate the numbers of signalmen, the Army found an ideal facility within thirty miles of Camp Kohler, at the University of California's College of Agriculture in Davis. The War Department approved the plan and soon signed a lease for the new facility. The Western Signal Corps School at Davis, under the administration of Camp Kohler, began instruction on 1 February 1943 and had a capacity for 1,000 students. Lieutenant Colonel Edward A. Allen was the first commandant of the school.

While most civilian studies at Davis ceased, university research on experimental farms was allowed to continue without interruption. The Signal Corps took over the classrooms, dormitories, fraternity houses, dining rooms, and athletic and instructional facilities of the university, and furnished the necessary instructional equipment. The initial specialties taught at Davis were radio operator, slow speed continuation; radio operator, high speed; radio repairman, ground; teletype installer repairman; repeaterman; and radio repairman, aircraft equipment. The new Davis school and the Signal Corps Replacement Training Center at Camp Kohler were combined to form the Western Signal Corps Training Center under the command of Brigadier General Sherrill.

When the soldiers were not training for war, they took advantage of all types of recreational programs. Kohler fielded sports teams in baseball, basketball, softball, touch football, boxing, golf, bowling, volleyball, and table tennis. Besides sports for soldiers, Camp Kohler had an orchestra, a band, and a glee club that performed both on and off post. Other entertainment, sponsored by the Hollywood Victory Committee, included shows with all-star casts featuring famous actors such as Lucille Ball, Desi Arnaz, Leo Carrillo, and Ann Ayers. Furthermore, the camp sponsored a beauty contest in which Ms. Faith Cathcart of Sacramento became Miss Camp Kohler. The *Message*, the Camp Kohler weekly newspaper with up to 10,000 readers, began as a single mimeographed page and grew into a larger

publication over its 170-week run, with a final illustrated souvenir edition covering the history of the Signal Corps “city.”

Over the course of its life, Camp Kohler had five Signal Corps commanders. The first, Brigadier General Sherrill, had recently served in Washington, DC, in the Office of the Chief of Signal. Colonel Harry E. Storms, formerly Signal Officer of the Caribbean Defense Command, followed on 5 April 1943. Colonel James W. Green, Jr., who started the first radar school in the United States, arrived in June 1944. Colonel John L. Autrey, arrived on 16 August 1944 from Australia and New Guinea. After he left for Camp Crowder, Colonel Hugh Mitchell, formerly Signal Corps Officer for the Services of Supply in the Southwest Pacific, replaced him on 9 September 1944. Finally, in early January 1946, Colonel Harry J. Farmer (Transportation Corps) took command of the Camp Kohler Port of Embarkation.

The Army discontinued the Western Signal Corps Unit Training Center at Camp Kohler and the Western Signal Corps School at Davis, effective 31 October 1944, and the Army Air Forces assumed command for an overseas replacement center and took jurisdiction of the laundry on 14 December 1944. The \$700,000 laundry, which continued to operate until 1973, had been responsible for processing more than 600,000 articles of clothing a month for soldiers and airmen from not only Camp Kohler, but also Mather Field, McClellan Field, and the Western Signal Corps School at Davis. The laundry employed 286 people at a wage of seventy-four cents per hour. Because of the large laundry requirements, German prisoners of war, detailed from the Stockton Ordnance Depot and later moved to McClellan Field, augmented the regular civilian workforce.

In addition to the replacement depot, other notable activities occurred at Camp Kohler during 1945. For three weeks during March, the California State Guard’s High School Cadet Corps held exercises and occupied vacant barracks. Then, on 13 July 1945, a German prisoner escaped, but was found near a stream in Roseville by some teenage boys who notified the authorities. He was captured and held until his return to Germany. On 9 November, due to a housing shortage in the area, 234 Japanese evacuees from relocation centers in the western United States were allowed to return temporarily to the barracks, much to the protest of the Sacramento Chamber of Commerce and the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

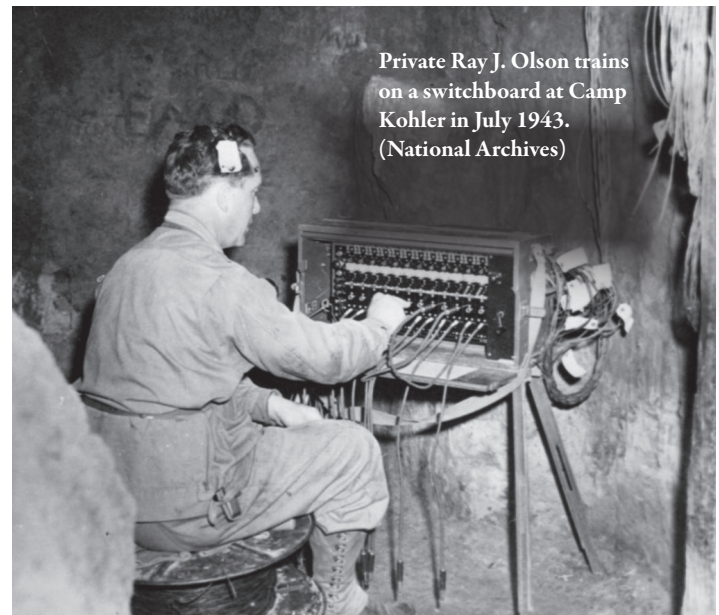
On 15 November 1945, Camp Kohler was transferred once again to the Army for use as a branch of Camp Stoneman, San Francisco Port of Embarkation (SFPOE), where personnel worked hard to help soldiers get discharged and home before the upcoming holidays. The SFPOE declared Kohler surplus on 19 March 1946, and the Corps of Engineers took over the property for disposal. The following year a large fire engulfed portions of Camp Kohler, destroying approximately fifty post buildings and up to twenty homes near the camp. Nevertheless, Army Ground Forces began using the Walerga Engineer Sub-Depot and its adjoining site for postwar reserve activities, and Army and Air National Guard units began using thirty-two acres of the camp as an armory. In 1951, the Air Force considered reactivating Camp Kohler to active status as a basic training center; however, the Department of Defense cited the “necessity of having to practically rebuild Kohler [from the ground up],” (estimated at \$64million) as the reason for its disapproval.

In October 1947 and December 1948, the California State Finance Department sold off the first of the buildings to veterans. An article in the *Sacramento Bee* announced, “Housing-hungry veterans, some of whom stood in line for two day stretches have

purchased...war surplus buildings...at Camp Kohler.” Later, in 1952 and 1955, the Sacramento District, Corps of Engineers, again sold buildings, but to the public. Shortages of building materials had made the structures valuable. Finally, in 1959, the federal government relinquished ownership of the Camp Kohler sewage treatment facility to Sacramento County, which had been leasing it rent free since 1946. In exchange, the county agreed to process without charge sewage and waste water from the laundry and a communications building at McClellan Air Force Base (AFB).

Today, little more than a few remnants of Camp Kohler remains. A sign reads, “Camp Kohler, 5922 Roseville Rd, Gate 201.” It is next to a fenced area that has a building and a tower with a rotating antenna. This area, formerly part of Camp Kohler and later McClellan AFB, had been leased to the Federal Aviation Administration and was later transferred to it. There is also a large concrete foundation from the former base laundry, and a plaque in Walerga Park denoting California Landmark #934, the former Sacramento Assembly Center. Today, the former Signal Corps camp site is part of a residential subdivision in the Foothill Farms/North Highlands area.

For an Army post, Camp Kohler had a short but interesting life span of four years. After a rough start, Camp Kohler became a polished military installation, and it answered the call no matter how difficult the task. Camp Kohler wore many hats in its short history. Starting as a War Relocation Authority facility, it became a Signal Corps training center, an Army Air Forces overseas replacement depot, an Army port of embarkation, and an engineer sub-depot. Above all, it was a “can do” military installation of many uses. ☐



Private Ray J. Olson trains on a switchboard at Camp Kohler in July 1943. (National Archives)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lieutenant Colonel Danny Johnson, USA-Ret., is a private military scholar who has contributed to On Point and a number of other military publications. He specializes in World War I, World War II, Korean War, Vietnam War, and historic posts. He currently resides in Sacramento, California.