

Dropping in on the 82nd Airborne

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As the old saying goes, there is a first time for everything. Admittedly, sight-seeing trips are best done in spring, summer or fall, when the temperatures are more favorable for being out and about. But who goes sight-seeing in the dead of winter? I do, t'would seem.

Back in December I was watching a program on North Carolina public television describing a one-of-a-kind, on-going art exhibition featuring the works of M. C. Escher that was being held at the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh. A passing thought flitted through my brain that it would be nice to see that exhibition. The thought quickly passed but, several days later, it returned and hung around a little while longer.

I started giving serious thought to actually taking a few days off from work early in January and going to see it. I went ahead and made my arrangements to be off those days and, since, I had about four days free I decided to fill up those days with other places that I could visit as well, despite it being winter. If I wanted to see the exhibition I had to go before January 17, when the exhibition was due to be over.

Perusing my maps and my collection of travel brochures I discovered that Fayetteville had a number of places that would be of interest to see, including two museums on the Forth Bragg Military Reservation. Fayetteville was a bit out of the way, but since I had never done any sight-seeing in that area, I made up my mind that that was the direction in which I would go.

On a Wednesday morning, while it was still dark, I left Greenville early enough to beat the Charlotte rush hour traffic, or at least the worst of it. From I-85 I connected with the outer loop of the

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Charlotte, N.C., circled underneath the Queen City and connected with US 74. Daylight finally started to appear somewhere between Monroe and Rockingham.

At Laurinburg I connected with US 401 and headed north toward Fayetteville. A few miles later, in the community of Wagram, I came upon a sign pointing left towards an historic site called the John Charles McNeil House. I decided to take a slight detour and check it out.

McNeil was a famous poet in the Tarheel state back around the turn of the previous century. His birth house was not open so early in the morning. Nearby is a small hexagonal brick building that served as a Temperance Hall built in 1860 where people met who were concerned about the adverse effects of the drinking of alcohol.

An historical marker on the property noted that Union troops under General William T. Sherman passed by on March 9, 1865 as they were pursuing the fleeing Confederate forces under the command of General Joseph E. Johnston during the closing days of the War Between the States. Union soldiers in a vandalizing mood shot off a large upturned chalice and Bible decoration from atop the Temperance Hall.

Almost as soon as I got back on 401 I saw a brown sign reading "Mill Prong." I drove three or four miles to see what exactly a "Mill Prong" was. I was about to lose interest in it and make a U-turn when I finally came up on it.

Mill Prong is a small mansion built in 1795. Although no one famous is connected to it, it is on the National Register of Historic Places. During the five minutes that I walked around the place I could hear a mean-sounding dog barking in the yard next door. Thank God he was tied up.

I continued on my way to Fayetteville, passing an historical marker along the way describing the Battle of Monroe's Crossroads, which took place on March 10, 1865. Although the marker is on US 401, the battle actually took place several miles away, on Fort Bragg property.

From 401 I accessed the All American Expressway, which is the main thoroughfare leading into the army post. The entrance to the fort reminded me of a multi-lane toll plaza at the end of a toll bridge, although no toll is actually charged. At least six or seven booths with raised toll gate arms allow a multitude of vehicles to pass through. Bragg is a hopping place.

Before driving through the "toll" plaza I had to stop in at the visitor center to get a pass. As soon as I walked in I was directed by an attendant at the desk to take a number from one of those paper number dispensers that you might find in a deli. Several people were already there ahead of me.

While sitting and waiting, I noticed a sign that said "Gun Check," or something to that affect. Apparently, civilians carrying firearms cannot bring them on base. As we know, guns don't belong on a military post.

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After only about twenty minutes I was called up to the desk and told to fill out a permit application that asked for personal information such as my name, etc., as well as my car and insurance information. A couple of minutes later I walked out with a 60-day paper pass that I placed on my dashboard. I was now free to meander around the base wherever visitors are allowed.

This portion of Fort Bragg is like a small city. There are red lights and stop signs, as well as a bowling alley, a KFC, a Dunkin Donuts and two Burger Kings. A multitude of buildings, including high-rise apartment complexes, fill the horizon. If there are old-style barracks on the base I did not see them.

Military personnel dressed in camouflage fatigues drive their own personal vehicles. Several of the main roads are named after World War II engagements in which the division was heavily involved, such as Normandy, Ardennes and Bastogne.

It took me several minutes but I finally found the 82nd Airborne War Memorial Museum, which does a good job of describing the history and multi-war exploits of the division, which was created in August 1917 as America was entering the first world war.

After the newly-formed 82nd Division came into existence, a contest was held to determine what to call it. The winning name was the "All American Division," named thus because it was the first army division ever created to include men from every state in the Union. 25 years later, in August 1942, it was reorganized as the 82nd Airborne Division. The 82nd has been involved in every conflict since World War I.

In addition to all kinds of militaria on display, several medal of honor recipients from the division, including the famous Sergeant Alvin York, are also featured. Also on display is a damaged metal cross, about three feet in height, that was once attached to the Senbat/Chapel in Vietnam. A plaque attached to the cross reads, "Hit by enemy fire but never out of action."

Outside the building several military aircraft from various periods are on display. I walked among them for a few minutes and then hopped in the car and drove a mile or so to my next destination, The John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Museum.

Near the museum building is a 12-foot statue of Colonel "Bull" Simons, who was a legendary Special Ops army officer during World War II and the Vietnam War. Approximately twenty soldiers wearing berets and cammy fatigues were holding what looked to be an awards ceremony in front of the monument.

On one side of the base of the monument are words from Isaiah 6 - "Who will go? 'Send me.'" On the other side is a quotation from Simons, "History teaches that when you become indifferent and lose the will to fight, someone who has the will to fight will take over." Sobering thought.

Before entering the museum I perused a damaged metal girder on display that came from one of

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the twin towers of the World Trade Center. As soon as I entered the building, to the right was a large display in honor of Simons. The rather small museum also features displays about telecommunications and psychological warfare.

Next Installment – A Taste of Combat