

History of Fort Richardson



Photo: Staff Sgt. Jeff Troth

Pfc. Darren Vitt, Co. C., 1-501 Airborne Task Force, uses his M-14 rifle to take out the "enemy" while his squad's other team advances towards a bunker during a live fire exercise on Fort Richardson.



Wilds P. Richardson



Fort Richardson was named for the military pioneer explorer, Brig. Gen. Wilds P. Richardson, who served three tours of duty in the rugged Alaska territory between 1897 and 1917. Richardson, a native Texan and an 1884 West Point graduate, commanded troops along the Yukon River and supervised construction of Fort Egbert near Eagle, and Fort William H. Seward (Chilkoot Barracks) near Haines.

As head of the War Department's Alaska Road Commission during 1905-1917, he was responsible for much of the surveying and building of early railroads, roads and bridges that helped the state's settlement and growth. The Valdez-Fairbanks Trail, surveyed under his direction in 1904, was named the Richardson Highway in his honor.

Fort Richardson was built during 1940-1941 on the site of what is now Elmendorf Air Force Base. Established as the headquarters of the United States Army, Alaska (USARAL) in 1947, the post moved to its present location five miles north of Anchorage in 1950. The post then had barracks for 500 Soldiers, a rifle range, a few warehouses, a hospital and bachelor officer quarters.

Alaska has been home to many U.S. Army units over the past decades, including the 7th Infantry Division, the 2nd Infantry Division, the 172nd Infantry Brigade, and most

recently the 6th Infantry Division (Light), which was inactivated on July 6, 1994, and reorganized into a combat brigade.

Fort Richardson is now headquarters for United States Army Alaska (USARAK). The mission of USARAK is to train and equip forces to rapidly deploy in support of combat operations and other operations worldwide. USARAK also has units at Fort Wainwright and Fort Greely. USARAK is a subordinate unit of United States Army Pacific (USARPAC).

The majority of USARAK combat forces are at Fort Wainwright, with Fort Richardson as the primary support base. The major unit at Fort Richardson is U.S. Army Garrison, Alaska, which provides mission and installation support for USARAK's combat forces. The major combat unit at Fort Richardson is the 1st Battalion, 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment. The battalion consists of approximately 500 Soldiers and is the only airborne infantry battalion in the Pacific Theater. Augmented by elements of other units, the 1-501 Task Force is a self-contained unit under USARAK and deployed to Afghanistan in October 2003.

A full range of family and Soldier support facilities common to any small community are found on post, ranging from a shoppette to childcare and recreational facilities. The post

has small but modern dental and medical clinics, and receives major medical services from the 3rd Medical Center at Elmendorf Air Force Base. The Joint Military Mall located between Fort Richardson and adjacent Elmendorf Air Force base provides post exchange and commissary services.

The post's largest military tenant is the Alaska National Guard, with facilities at Camp Carroll and Camp Denali. Fort Richardson also hosts several non-military activities to include a Veterans Administration National Cemetery and State of Alaska Fish Hatchery.

The fort has 2,272 Soldiers, with more than 2,900 family members here with their Soldier spouses. The fort employs about 1,300 Army and DOD civilian employees.

The annual military payroll for the fort in fiscal year 2002 was \$94 million. The civilian payroll was \$60 million. Including other expenditures, Fort Richardson put more than \$279 million into the local economy.

The fort encompasses 62,000 acres, which includes space for offices, family housing, a heliport, a drop zone suitable for airborne and air/land operations, firing ranges and other training areas. Nearby mountain ranges offer Soldiers the opportunity to learn mountain/glacier warfare and rescue techniques.