



When a friend snapped this shot in 1943, Joe E. Compton was an 18-year-old draftee at Camp Wallace being trained as an anti-aircraft gunner.

Camp Wallace recruits do battle with hurricane

'Rise, shine; it's daylight in the swamp'

By **BOB TUTT**
Houston Chronicle

A furious hurricane that suddenly sprang to life in the Gulf of Mexico caught a detachment of soldiers out in the open when it raked this part of Texas in July 1943.

Joe E. Compton, then an 18-year-old Army private, remembers that when a colonel received word of the approaching storm, he decided it shouldn't be allowed to halt their World War II training exercise.

But when slashing gales battered his troops that afternoon, the officer surely had second thoughts.

Feeling the hurricane's fury so directly gave Compton and his comrades indelible memories of their military training while stationed at a base in Galveston County called

Camp Wallace.

Wind-driven rain pelting their raincoats "stung like gravel and soaked us like drowned rats," Compton recalled. "We couldn't take refuge under trees because the wind was blowing them down. The safest place seemed to be out in the open.

"When we tried to eat," he said, "the rain was coming down so hard it washed the food out of our mess kits."

Their approximate location was on pasture land in the vicinity of what would later develop as Clear Lake City. They were roughly a dozen miles from Camp Wallace itself, adjacent to the then-unincorporated Hitchcock community on the Galveston County mainland. But it took them two days to haul their anti-aircraft weaponry back there through roads blocked by downed trees and other debris.

Compton was one of thousands of soldiers and then sailors to receive training at Camp Wallace. Established in February 1941 as war menaced America, it was named for Col. Elmer J. Wallace, an artillery



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officer killed in France just six days before an armistice ended World War I.

Spread over 1,600 acres of flat coastal plains, it served the Army as a base for training anti-aircraft gunners. The Navy took it over in May 1944 and used it to provide basic or "boot camp" training for recruits.

Then the Navy converted it to a center for seamen awaiting assignment to ships or naval bases. And after the war ended in August 1945, the Navy used it as a center for discharging sailors returning to civilian life.

Most of the young men arriving for training at Camp Wallace entered the military by way of the draft. They came from all over the country. Many had never been so far from home. They would quickly learn the frustrations of military life.

Compton, who grew up on a cotton farm near Henderson in East Texas, said that when he and other inductees were placed on a bus going to Camp Wallace, "we really didn't know where we were going because nobody told us."

First impressions of Camp Wallace ranged from the glare of the white oyster shell in the parking lots "that knocked your eyes out" to the Gulf Coast's debilitating heat and humidity.

Earl Anders, however, found that the weather stayed so mild during 12 weeks he spent at Camp Wallace, starting in September 1941, that he never had to wear a coat. A native of Timberville, Va., he moved to Houston with his wife after the war.

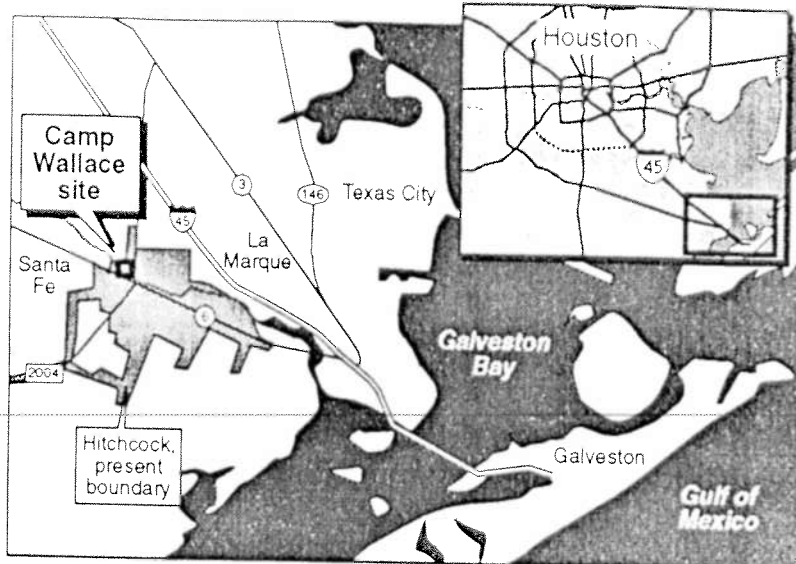
Because rains produced so much standing water and mud, Camp Wallace came to be known as "Swamp Wallace."

Walter Cryer, a native of Texas' Milam County now living at Lee, Fla., remembers that when he was stationed there, cadre would rouse young soldiers in the morning with these words: "Rise and shine. It's daylight in the swamp."

To train in the firing of anti-aircraft guns, the recruits would camp out for several days at a time on then-isolated, undeveloped beaches on the east end of Galveston Island. They would fire at targets towed over the Gulf.

"You can imagine how the sand got in everything we did," Compton said. "It seemed like the salt air would rust a weapon overnight. The salt marsh mosquitoes were some of the largest I'd ever seen. Most of us swore they could bite through our leggings."

The intensity of the training sticks



Chronicle



Howard Castleberry / Chronicle

Joe E. Compton, shown with some of his military memorabilia, made Houston his home after World War II.

'The salt marsh mosquitoes were some of the largest I'd ever seen.'

Joe E. Compton

in the memories of Cryer and Steve Kostiha, a native of Strawn, Texas, now living at Carlsbad, N.M. "We were kept busy all day every day," Cryer said.

"We trained like dogs," said Kostiha, mincing no words.

Some memories are very positive. Compton, who moved to Houston and used the G.I. Bill to help become an engineer, recalls that "there was good food and plenty of it, served family style in bowls that were passed around the table."

And veterans remember that when troopers could get some time off on Saturday afternoons and Sundays and overcome any shyness, there were lots of chances to meet girls in Houston and Galveston.

After the war, the federal government closed Camp Wallace. Its prop-

erty was considered as a possible site for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's Manned Spacecraft Center — now the Johnson Space Center — before the decision was made to place that facility at its location on NASA Road 1.

The University of Houston holds just over 915 acres of the Camp Wallace property where it operates the UH Coastal Center for research on conservation and environmental protection of coast areas. Another large chunk of the property became part of Galveston County's Jack Brooks Park.

Barely any trace of Camp Wallace and its 600-odd barracks and other buildings still exists, but for many who served there it vividly lives on in the memories of their youth.