

'First to Fire' statue gets new home

BY MITCH MEADOR / STAFF WRITER /LAWTON-CONSTITUTION / May 2010



The "First to Fire" statue that once greeted visitors inside the main gate of Fort Bliss, Texas, now holds a place of honor in front of 6th ADA Brigade Headquarters at Fort Sill.

Two former commanding generals of Fort Bliss were among the dignitaries gathered at Building 1611 on Randolph Road for an unveiling and rededication of the 20-year-old statue on Thursday. Retired Maj. Gen. Donald Infante commissioned the statue, and retired Lt. Gen. Donald Lionettie dedicated it the first time on Dec. 1, 1989.

"We're here today to rededicate the 'First to Fire' statue. ... Those of you who served at Fort Bliss are welcoming an old friend here to Fort Sill. But we have many present today who have not served at Bliss and don't understand the statue's significance to the Air Defense branch," Infante said.

"The statue we dedicate today honors our most precious resource, which is our soldiers. Interestingly enough, there'll be a Field Artillery statue dedication (today). And do you know what the purpose of that dedication's going to be? The soldier, which is the most precious resource for both branches, and it's further evidence of the commonality and thinking between the two great branches," Infante said.

Infante said old-timers can recall when there was an Ajax missile on Memorial Circle inside Pershing Gate at Fort Bliss.

"I had to walk by that Ajax missile every day to get to my office, and I looked and I saw all the things that were going on in our branch, and I said, 'There has to be a better representation of our branch than this old Ajax missile.'

"So I said to myself, 'It has to represent the ADA soldier, it has to represent the ADA non-commissioned officer.'" The colonels advising him said there needed to be a third element, an ADA weapon, which quickly came down to Stinger.

The real-life models for the state were Staff Sgt. Alfred Jackson of Baltimore, Md., and Spc. Gregory Bowman, an Illinois National Guard soldier. The two of them posed for photographers in the Hueco Mountains east of El Paso, Texas, and sculptor Brian Steadbreck of Adonis Bronze, Alpine, Utah, used those photos as the basis for the ADA statue.

"Isn't it appropriate that the Air Defense soldier is a National Guardsman, considering the great contributions that the National Guard forces made, not only to air defense, but to our nation, both in the past and the present," Infante said.

"Today the statue begins a new phase of its history as we rededicate it in its new home of Fort Sill," he said.

Infante said the statue is here because it represents the soul of the Air Defense branch. It will remain a memorial to all air defenders, past, present and future, he said.

The sculptor chose the faces of the soldiers to be the composition focal point, according to Fort Sill narrator John Beemer.

"The faces of the brave soldiers reflect the intensity of combat and courage, competence and dedication typical of the young men and women who serve the Air Defense Artillery to this day. The 'First to Fire' statue depicts a Stinger team leader and its gunner preparing to launch against a harmful threat. It represents elemental and fundamental air defense

artillery at the soldier/non-commissioned officer level," Beemer said.

Maj. Gen. David D. Halverson, commanding general of Fort Sill and the Fires Center of Excellence, expressed pleasure that the unveiling and rededication of the ADA statue could take place during the first Fires Seminar in which ADA is a full partner.

"What a great day," said Brig. Gen. Roger F. Mathews, chief of ADA and commandant of the ADA School. "Today we unveil the Air Defense 'First to Fire' statue. The soldiers it represents signify the thousands of air defenders that have gone before in the various formations for the last 43 years.

"The Air Defense Artillery branch was originally designated a separate branch in 1968. But our lineage begins back with artillery, so it's very poignant as we stand here today as a member of the Fires Center of Excellence, in front of Gen. (Dennis J.) Reimer's former headquarters (a reference to when Building 1611 housed III Corps Artillery headquarters), that also makes it pretty nice as well," Mathews said.

"This signifies bringing together not just the branches but providing greater capabilities and effects for our warfighting formations. That's what a center of excellence is all about," Mathews said. "Even more fitting today is to have two former commandants and our ADA Association president (retired Col. Harry Cohen) here to help us unveil the statue. Gen. Lionetti and Gen. Infante were key figures in our branch's modernization and played a key role in the construction of this great monument to our soldiers."