

HOUSING AMERICA'S HEROES



Military housing has never been known for style, status or upscale living; however right now approximately ten percent of the nation's soldiers and their families live in on-base housing, with another 24 percent living in privatized off-base military housing. In an effort to raise the standard for military homes, which the Office of the Deputy Undersecretary of Defense describes as "often dilapidated, too small, lacking in modern facilities," several military bases have sought to improve military housing. Modular housing has proved it can meet the demands of providing functional yet appealing housing for today's modern military families.



By Joe Lontos



Fort Lewis Army Base, a sizable military base located in western Washington state, decided a few years ago to modernize its housing for resident soldiers and their families. After looking for a contractor that would be able to deliver the changes they were seeking, the search concluded with the selection of Champion Homes' Silverton plant.

"Military housing could be improved by updating standards and sizes of houses," noted Lieutenant General John Bradley, who lived for nearly seven years on Boling Air Force Base and oversaw some of the housing operations. "Many times, military houses are quite small compared to those outside of military bases. They are normally quite old and the rooms, bathrooms, and closets are small."

Champion Homes signed a contract hoping to provide improvements in military housing like what Lieutenant General John Bradley described. Champion Homes agreed not only to build 460 modular homes for Fort Lewis but to build these homes to Northwest Energy Star site-built standards. This was a challenge because Energy Star standards are 15 percent above those of Washington state's site-built code. This meant the homes had to meet very specific criteria. For example, walls, ceilings and floors need to have a thicker layer of insulation than traditional site-built homes. Additionally, a special ventilation system that produces a minimum of noise had to be developed, heating ducts needed to be sealed and tested, all built-in-appliances had to be Energy Star-rated, and the contract also required a third party inspector to examine all of the homes. This was the first time modular construction had been used for permanent military housing on a U.S. military base.

The project was completed and the homes proved vastly different from their older counterparts. The new homes offered functionality, style, and curb appeal, which their predecessors did not. The homes provide a diversity that had never before been seen on a military base with their offering of various different floor plans. For example, the “Lincoln” is a three-bedroom, two-bath, two-story triplex; the “Madison” is a two-bedroom, two-bath, two-story duplex. With homes ranging from 1,700 to 2,200 square feet in size, and with extras such as hardwood floors, kitchen islands, and nine-foot ceilings the homes compete favorably with the Pacific Northwest residential marketplace.

The Fort Lewis modular homes were also built with kiln-dried lumber inside a controlled environment which addressed consumer and industry concerns about mold and mildew.

The combination of these amenities and energy efficiency efforts makes these homes an excellent addition to Fort Lewis. Additionally, these more modern structures offer the soldiers and their families a style and luxury they’d not had before and were more in-line with what any homeowner desires in a home.

Early last year, Fort Bliss in El Paso, Texas also decided it needed to upgrade on-base housing. Military officials selected Trendsetter Homes, Fleetwood Enterprises Inc.’s modular housing divi-

sion, to revitalize its housing, which encompasses 1.1 million acres and a total of 470 units. “The benefit of modular construction for this project is the speed of delivery to the site, as well as less clutter on the site and disturbance of base operations,” said Douglas Henriquez, director for Trendsetter business development.

While modular homes like those installed in Fort Lewis and Fort Bliss are a marked improvement, there is another initiative which is changing the housing landscape on military bases: privatization.

Bradley shared his opinion on the matter, saying “Privatization will help immensely. Through privatization, hous-



es will be larger and of better quality. Consequently, this will further encourage military families to live on military bases.”

In 1996, Congress established the Military Housing Privatization Initiative (MHPI) in order to help the U.S. military improve the quality of life for their families. The goal of the MHPI is to attract necessary private sector financing, expertise and innovation. Through the MHPI, private developers can be selected by the U.S. military to enter into agreements to own, maintain, and operate family housing with a 50-year lease.

Equity Residential Property Management Corp/Lincoln Development, LLC has entered into one such privatization agreement with the

U.S. military and signed a 50-year housing privatization contract on April 1, 2002, assuming ownership of nearly 4,000 homes and future homes at Fort Lewis. Over a period of years, Equity will be managing the base’s family housing communities, building new housing, renovating existing housing and demolishing and rebuilding existing housing in other areas.

Equity Residential has also made it a point to make sure homes located on Fort Lewis are as energy efficient as possible. “This [energy efficiency] is very important to us since we own the houses. Equity will be maintaining and operating these houses in partnership with the U.S. military over the next 50

years. But we will be paying the utility bills, so energy efficiency is definitely to our benefit,” said Boyd Lucas, Executive Development Manager for the Fort Lewis project.

Our members of the military give up so much for this great nation, sacrificing years of their life, time with their families and too many times their health or their existence. In return they were given stodgy, bland housing with substandard qualities unbecoming America’s finest. The solutions implemented at Fort Lewis and other military bases around the nation are a great start to bringing an enhanced sense of pride into the families who so aptly deserve it. ★

