



Governor Bert T. Combs. (Credit: Abbie Rowe)

Lore of the Corps

Coming Full Circle

Governor Bert Combs's Journey from Fort Knox to Kentucky Leadership and Back

By Mr. Brandon Borgemenke

On a sunny May afternoon in 1960, Governor Bert T. Combs stood on the grounds of Fort Knox, dedicating a new grave marker

for Abraham Lincoln's grandmother, Bathsheba Lincoln.¹ This moment, bridging Kentucky's past and present, also served

as a poignant reminder of Combs's own journey; from a young Army judge advocate (JA) to the Commonwealth's highest office, Combs gravitated back to this familiar military installation as governor years after his formative service in the Nation's oldest law firm. Combs's story is one of coming full circle, a journey that began and ended with service, both in and out of uniform, animated by the desire to be a force for justice.

Bert Thomas Combs was born in 1911 in Manchester, Kentucky, tucked away in the lush mountains of eastern Kentucky.² Academic excellence and a strong work ethic marked his early life. In high school, Combs and his sister rode their pony, lovingly named "Turkey," to school, allowing him to graze in the woods near the school.³ Combs worked his way through college, first at Cumberland College and then at the University of Kentucky Law School, where he graduated second in his class in 1937.⁴ This legal education would prove invaluable in his future military and political careers.

When World War II erupted, Combs answered the Nation's call. Leaving his Prestonsburg law practice in September 1942, he enlisted in the U.S. Army as a private.⁵ The events at Pearl Harbor prompted Combs's desire to contribute to the war effort and moved him to join the Service.⁶ Combs matriculated into the Army through the Volunteer Officer Candidate program.⁷ Initiated in 1942, the program allowed men who had previously been deferred from military service to apply for officer training.⁸ Under this scheme, candidates like Combs could enter basic training with the opportunity to attend Officer Candidate School and retain the option to return to civilian life if not selected or commissioned.⁹

After completing his basic training at Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland, Combs attended Officer Candidate School in 1943 at the Judge Advocate General's School in Ann Arbor, Michigan, for training to become a JA.¹⁰ Graduating as a second lieutenant in three months' time, Combs was assigned to Fort Knox, his first-choice duty station.¹¹ At Fort Knox, Combs served as the staff judge advocate,

which allowed him to drive to Lexington every weekend to visit his wife, Mabel, and newborn daughter, Lois.¹²

By early 1945, then-First Lieutenant Combs served in the South Pacific on General Douglas MacArthur's staff in the

particularly in his emphasis on the rule of law and equitable application of justice.

During his tenure as governor, Combs's journey came full circle, bringing him back to Fort Knox. The 1960 dedication of Bathsheba Lincoln's grave marker

local legal knowledge with a global perspective.

Today, as JAs continue to mill about the offices, fields, and forests at Fort Knox, they unknowingly follow in the footsteps of a man who began his own journey of service on those very grounds. Bert Combs's life serves as an inspiring example for military lawyers and all Service members of how one can translate military legal experience into meaningful civilian leadership, and how the call to serve can bring us full circle, back to where we began. **TAL**

His journey from Army private to JA captain, from wartime legal investigator to peacetime governor, exemplifies how military legal service can prepare individuals for future challenges in civilian government.

War Crimes Department.¹³ Rising to chief of the investigating section, Combs assisted in the investigation and prosecution of Japanese war criminals.¹⁴ This role allowed him to apply his legal expertise to complex international legal issues, an experience that would later prove valuable in his political career. His exemplary service earned him the Bronze Star and the Philippine Medal of Merit.¹⁵ Combs was promoted to captain in the fall of 1945.¹⁶ As a JA, Combs honed his legal skills by working in military justice assignments to operational law assignments.

Upon his discharge in 1946, Combs decided to return home to Kentucky.¹⁷ This homecoming set the stage for his rapid ascent in Kentucky's legal and political spheres. He resumed his law practice in Prestonsburg, served as city attorney and Commonwealth's attorney, and, in 1951, filled a vacancy on the Kentucky Court of Appeals (then the state's highest court).¹⁸ In each of these roles, Combs drew upon his JAG Corps experience and applied the discipline, attention to detail, and legal acumen he developed during his military service.

Combs's gubernatorial ambitions emerged in 1955, though his initial bid was unsuccessful.¹⁹ Undeterred, he ran again in 1959 and emerged victorious.²⁰ As governor from 1959 to 1963, Combs left an indelible mark on Kentucky by championing education, conservation, and infrastructure improvements.²¹ His approach to governance was notably influenced by his legal background and JAG Corps experience,

was more than a historical commemoration; it symbolically linked Combs's civilian leadership to his military and legal roots.²² Standing on the grounds upon which he once served as a young staff judge advocate, now as the Commonwealth's highest-ranking official, Combs embodied the ideal of the citizen-Soldier turned public servant. This event at Fort Knox encapsulated the essence of Combs's remarkable journey. From a young man leaving home to serve his country as a military lawyer to a seasoned leader returning to honor the past and shape the future, Combs's life traced a path of service that continually brought him back to his Kentucky roots and legal foundations.

Combs's story resonates with JAs who parlay their military legal experience into public leadership roles. His journey from Army private to JA captain, from wartime legal investigator to peacetime governor, exemplifies how military legal service can prepare individuals for future challenges in civilian government.

Bert T. Combs passed away in 1991 at the age of eighty, leaving behind a legacy of service both in and out of uniform.²³ Yet, his story did not end there. In a fitting tribute, part of the Mountain Parkway—a highway system he championed as governor—was renamed the Bert T. Combs Mountain Parkway.²⁴ This highway, like Combs's own journey, connects the rural Eastern Kentucky of his youth with the broader world he came to serve, much as his JAG Corps experience connected his

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Notes

1. *Lincolnia Notes*, 53 J. ILL. STATE HIST. SOC'Y 183, 188-89 (1960).
2. Ky. Hist. Soc'y, *Governor Bert T. Combs*, 58 REG. KY. HIST. SOC'Y 2, 3 (1960).
3. BERT COMBS THE POLITICIAN: AN ORAL HISTORY 10 (George W. Robinson ed., 1991).
4. Ky. Hist. Soc'y, *supra* note 2, at 3.
5. *Id.* at 3-4.
6. BERT COMBS THE POLITICIAN, *supra* note 3, at 19.
7. *Id.*
8. WILLIAM R. KEAST, THE PROCUREMENT AND BRANCH DISTRIBUTION OF OFFICERS, ARMY GROUND FORCES STUDY NO. 6 (Historical Section - Army Ground Forces, Sept. 1, 1945), <https://history.army.mil/books/agf/AGF006/ch06.htm>
9. *Id.*
10. BERT COMBS THE POLITICIAN, *supra* note 3, at 19.
11. *Id.* at 19-20.
12. *JAGS Alumni Notes*, THE JUDGE ADVOC. J., Mar. 1945, at 58.
13. Ky. Hist. Soc'y, *supra* note 2, at 3-4.
14. *Id.*
15. *Id.* at 4.
16. *List of Promotions*, THE JUDGE ADVOC. J., Fall-Winter 1945, at 43.
17. Ky. Hist. Soc'y, *supra* note 2, at 4.
18. *Id.*
19. *Id.*
20. *Id.*
21. *Bert Combs Dies at 80; Ex-Kentucky Governor*, WASH. POST, Dec. 5, 1991, at D11.
22. *Lincolnia Notes*, *supra* note 1, at 188-89.
23. WASH. POST, *supra* note 21.
24. *Bert T. Combs Mountain Parkway*, KY. TOURISM, <https://www.kentuckytourism.com/parkways/bert-t-combs-mountain-parkway> (last visited Jan. 15, 2025).