The opening of the new aquatic center at Fort Bliss, Texas, in 2013 marked a new era in aquatics on post. The $15 million, 50,000-square-foot facility, which houses three pools and support facilities — including a high-tech classroom — provides needed pool space on post for everything from physical training, therapy and water aerobics to recreation, competition and swim lessons.

“The Aquatic Center was needed because the installation grew tremendously with the BRAC [Base Realignment and Closure] process that happened, and the 1st Armored Division coming to base,” noted Aquatics Director Stephanie Mc-Gruder. “We had only one indoor aquatic center prior to this one, so providing soldier training — with the almost 30,000 soldiers — as well as support for family recreation, was quite difficult. We were very busy, so with that kind of demand, we had a good reason to build this aquatic center. It is designed primarily for the kind of training that all of the soldiers need to do here. And then another important aspect of the facility is that it could double for family recreation.”

The design concept was developed as a team effort between the Fort Bliss Sports, Fitness and Aquatics division; the U.S. Army Engineering and Support Center, which is the center of standardization for Army Physical Fitness Centers (PFCs); the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) Little Rock District, which did the technical reviews of the project; and the aquatics consultant, Jim Bastian of Westport Pools. The design, along with the criteria developed by the same team, was put out in a design-build request for proposal, which was awarded to Megen Construction, according to Jay Clark, R.A., U.S. Engineering and Support Center, Huntsville Technical Lead - Centers of Standardization, U.S. Army Engineering and Support Center.

“The overall design template was based on the projected needs of all of East Fort Bliss,” noted Clark. “Originally, each PFC to be built on post was to have its own pool, but the installation said that it would much rather have one facility that had all of the pool capacity, as it would help them with staffing and things of that nature. This project had been in the works for several years, and when they brought it forward for review, we had already created a plan that addressed all of the needs of an expanding East Fort Bliss.”

Clark explained that by having three pools in one facility, the project team was able to do some unique things with the facility. “If we had just added a pool at each PFC, it would have been a 25-meter pool in each facility, but by combining it into this one aquatic center, we were able to give them a 50-meter...
pool, a diving tank and a multipurpose pool with a climbing wall that can be used for many different functions.”

Operationally, the three-pools-in-one-facility design is very beneficial, from staffing to programming to maintenance. “It is designed so one of the pools could be closed while the others remain open,” Clark pointed out. “So if they needed to take a pool down for cleaning or something, they could do that without disrupting the other two pools. And for programming, you can have soldiers training in one pool while families recreate in another. It is a one-of-a-kind facility in the Army.”

“With the design the way it is, and us having three pools, each of the pools has a separate filter, which is fantastic when it comes to operating an aquatic facility that holds just under a million gallons of water,” added M C Gruder. “If anything happens in one pool, you can continue to run others while the one with the deficiency is being sanitized or whatever is the need. We have soldiers who go in the pool with dirty uniforms, so a lot of times we will have to raise the chlorine levels in one pool, and vacuum it out, but with this setup, we can still stay operational at the same time, which is really nice. We get very busy with PT in the morning, and then open for recreation the rest of the day and training. Having those three pools means we can pretty much accommodate a variety of activities.”

According to Clark, the facility is Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design or LEED Silver certifiable. “Basically, all of the projects that come to the USACE have to meet LEED Silver standards,” he explained. “There are solar panels to supplement the hot water, as well as a heat recovery system to help heat the pool water with heat generated from the AC units. And we incorporated as much glass as we could to reduce lighting costs and energy usage.”

He continued, “I like the materials they used for construction, including a concrete roof structure so we don’t have to worry about corrosion on exposed joists like you would if it was a metal structure or roof deck. We really tried hard to make it the kind of state-of-the-art facility you would find on a college campus or in a municipality. We are happy with the facility, and we gave them as much as we could for the budget. We also planned ahead, and worked with the contractor to give us as much space outside so if they ever get more funding they can expand to offer an outdoor pool as well.”

**DESIGN AND FUNCTIONALITY**

The aquatic center features a 50-meter, Olympic-sized main pool with a bulkhead that splits the pool in half with 25 meters on one side and 25 meters on the other. “We set it up this way so we can accommodate lap swimming and recreational swimming at the same time,” explained M C Gruder. “Typically, it is set up for water polo and recreation on the shallow end.”

On the other side of the facility is the multipurpose pool, which was designed as a therapy pool for wounded warriors, and for recreation and training. “It has zero-depth entry and it goes all the way up to 8 feet,” noted M C Gruder. “We keep the pool warm, at about 86, but we can heat it up to 92 for therapy, if needed. There is a rock-climbing feature in that pool that is used for both recreation for all and physical training for soldiers — they will do relays that include the use of the wall. And there are fountains and water spray features over the zero-depth entry that kids really enjoy playing in.”

“The multipurpose pool is just unique all around,” added Clark. “We had a pool consultant who did one of those rock-climbing walls with the waterfalls for a university, and he
helped us write the specs for that. The climbing wall meets the need for both training challenges and recreation purposes. The multipurpose pool is ideal for training, and because it is smaller, it is easier to clean or drain and take care of after soldiers have trained in there, and fouled up the water, as opposed to the 50-meter pool with all of that volume of water.”

There is also a 13-foot-deep diving well — with two springboards and a 10-meter platform — that is designed mainly for Combat Water Survival Training, but it is also used for recreation. “The diving well is set up that eventually when the funding or the need is there, it can be converted to have a dunker, such as a helicopter dunker simulator, to support training,” noted McGruder.

Outside the water, the facility houses a classroom that is used nearly every day for multiple training and educational purposes. “One of the unique things about the facility is that it has a pretty high-tech classroom that we use for lifeguard training and also reserve for unit training,” noted McGruder. “There are a couple of TVs in there, a smart board, and it is capable of hooking up 85 Internet ports, so just about any training imaginable can be done there. So that is fantastic for both us and for the units that come in.”

McGruder pointed out that the facility has a good flow to it, and was designed so that there is a dry side and a wet side of the facility, helping to keep certain areas dry that need to stay dry. “This is nice because if we have training that is not aquatic-based and is just happening in that classroom, the classroom stays dry and the atrium hallway entry area stays dry. The locker rooms have entrances and exits to the wet side of the facility as well, and then that area connects, so patrons don’t have to leave that wet corridor to switch pools.”

The facility also houses family restrooms, which have been well received by families on post. “This is great from an MWR standpoint because, per regulation, kids older than kindergarten age have to use gender-appropriate locker rooms,” noted McGruder. “So, with the family rooms you don’t have to send your 5-year-old into a locker room by themselves. I’ve gotten a lot of positive feedback about that feature.”

PROGRAMMING

With the new aquatic center, Fort Bliss has been able to expand on its training and programming capability.

“At the beginning of 2014, we started a Combat Water Survival train-the-trainer program,” noted McGruder. “Our Combat Water Survival Training (CWST) program is mandatory training that soldiers have to do in order to be mission capable, and that is based off a training circular that the Army puts out; however, that circular is written in Army language so it can be hard to read and understand, especially for someone who doesn’t have a lot of aquatic knowledge, and sometimes the training is not as effective as it was intended to be. So we started this course, and I taught it in the beginning. Then we trained additional instructors, where we brought in NCOs or senior leaders, and went over the training circular with them.”

The training program includes videos of all of the skills, so there is a visual of exactly what the Army wants them to do. “They go through every single skill so that they actually have the physical ability to do it and the ability to teach it,” she explained. “At the end they get a certificate and then they are able to teach CWST to their units. It has been a very popular program with very high usage by soldiers.”

Also on the training side, the aquatic center hosts Shallow Water Egress Training, or SWET, which has proven vitally important for saving soldiers’ lives.

“SWET is training the Army started doing because of all of the casualties caused by vehicles going into the water,” explained McGruder. “This is done in the multipurpose pool. We have a trainer that resembles a vehicle. We dunk soldiers in the water and turn them upside down to train them to get out of the vehicle without panicking. We have them do it blindfolded with their gear on, to try to replicate the reality of the situation. This training has been very popular with units.”

In addition to the soldier training that goes on, the aquatic center is able to offer water aerobics and a widely expanded adult swim program. “The program is based on the American Red Cross curriculum recommendations, but we try to branch it out a little bit so it is marketed to soldiers and what they really need to do,” noted McGruder. “A lot of times we have a soldier come in who has never had a lesson or aquatic training and just wants to be able to swim with his weapon so he can pass the course. So we put them through our program to help them meet their goal. There are group lessons, but they are very individualized, and we are able to help our soldiers...
with that. We also offer those lessons to military dependents and family members.”

Starting this year, Aquatics will offer an intramural water polo program at the aquatic center that McGruder said she hopes will be popular. “Because we have the option to set up water polo in the shallow area, we can also have non-swimmers come and participate,” she explained. “We can also set up water polo in the deep end and play to regulation if so desired.”

Aquatics often partners with MWR to do activities for families. “Last year we did a Strong B.A.N.D.S event where we brought in some instructors for kid’s swim lessons, and a baby bubble class for parents with their very young children,” noted McGruder. “We also did some kayaking and swim lessons during that event. We also have done a water safety week event in coordination with Child and Youth Services. For that we brought the kids from the classrooms and went over some American Red Cross safety rules with them, and invited them to come and play safely in our multipurpose pool after that.”

In addition to numerous water aerobics classes, the pain management clinic at Fort Bliss uses the multipurpose pool for aqua yoga therapy for soldiers. “We also have soldiers who come to that multipurpose pool and do physical therapy that they have been given a prescription for, and we can support that with some of the equipment that we have on hand,” McGruder pointed out. “And that aquatic yoga rehab class takes place in the multipurpose therapy pool, and we are looking to add more.”

She continued, “Because we are part of the Sports, Fitness and Aquatics branch, we also do quite a few events under sports, including two triathlons every year that take place at the facility, and we get a lot of interest in that. We also do two aquathlons every year, one individual and one team. That is a biathlon type of race that consists of a run event, a swim event and then another run event.”

**STAFFING**

With such a large community at Fort Bliss, having the ability to train staff on post has been invaluable, according to McGruder, who is lifeguard instructor-certified, water safety instructor-certified, and a National Swimming Pool Foundation (NSPF)-certified pool operator.

“We are very fortunate at the facility to be able to train our own staff,” she said. “We host a lifeguard hiring fair every year in April where we bring in prospective lifeguards from Fort Bliss and the surrounding El Paso community. After they do their prerequisite swim test for the Red Cross, they pick one of our training courses, and we put them through the lifeguard course and give them an interview. Many are selected to work for us for the upcoming season, and many of them stay on with us past the summer season to work for us.”

She continued, “Being able to go from prospective lifeguard to being trained by us and then working for us gives us really good staff members who are well-trained and well-versed in what goes on here at Fort Bliss — the type of activities that we offer here. They know them well and the possible dangers of anything that is going on.”

Fort Bliss also offers training after staff members become certified lifeguards, such as the water safety instructor training course through the Red Cross, and lifeguard instructor training for lifeguards who show exemplary understanding of what the requirements for water safety are. “They will go on to teach lifeguarding classes throughout the year and during our hiring event as well,” noted McGruder. “We also teach CPR for other entities here on post.”

Fort Bliss also recently offered an Aquatic Exercise Association (AEA) certification for some of its staff members, which was intended “to help build up our water aerobics program, and we are seeing good growth there,” said McGruder, who also holds an AEA aquatic exercise certificate.

All of this effort to improve Aquatics on post, from the addition of the new aquatic center to the subsequent increase in programming and training capability, underscores the overall importance of aquatics on a post like Fort Bliss.

“Aquatic training and just knowing how to swim is extremely important to everyone, especially soldiers and their families,” noted McGruder. “They come to us from all over the country, and they may or may not have had the opportunity to participate in swim lessons. It is something that is important if you are going to enjoy water recreation, and especially if you have to do training in and around the water. Drowning is preventable, and so having awareness and training programs is the biggest step in preventing it. I think we are doing a great job here at Fort Bliss in providing that, and giving them a good and safe place to recreate near where they live.”

—GRF