



From Milk Jugs to Swing Sets

Recycled playground and outdoor equipment gives Fort Polk, Louisiana, communities a boost.

By Chris St. John and Ruben Leenders

Perhaps you've heard the Army saying, "You enlist the soldier, but you re-enlist the family." That saying has been around a long time, but by the early 1990s it also garnered the attention of Congress. A report concluded that 60 percent of US Department of Defense housing was inadequate. In 1995, just before the establishment of the Military Housing Privatization Initiative (MHPI), a Defense Science Board report concluded that military housing "made daily activities a trial and lowered morale."

As the MHPI has become a reality on

many military installations around the United States, not only have new homes been built, but true communities have been established on the installations. One such example exists at Fort Polk, Louisiana. When Picerne was awarded a privatization contract for Fort Polk in September 2004, the company set out to create a community that would greatly enhance the quality of life for soldiers and their families. This emphasis certainly started with a focus on building and refurbishing quality homes but went beyond a home, a street, or just one neighborhood. The company sought to

bring about a sense of community at Fort Polk with play.

Community at play

Upon reviewing the installation, site managers discovered more than 150 play structures scattered throughout the neighborhoods on the installation. The items ranged from tetherball posts to swing sets. Most of the items were outdated and in disrepair, which presented a safety concern. The company knew it could make an immediate impact on the quality of life for families by creating recreation destinations that

offered something for everyone in the family—swings, age-appropriate play structures, basketball and tennis courts, picnic areas, and pavilions and benches for sitting and visiting with friends and neighbors.

Team members soon realized they would need an additional partner to

carry out the vision they had for Fort Polk. With a green outlook in mind for the improvements, they began to search for an environmentally conscious playground company to help carry out their plan. After much research, the company decided to enlist Play Mart, a playground manufacturer that extrudes its



own proprietary Recycled Structural Plastic (RSP). This sustainable High-Density Polyethylene (HDPE) product is made primarily from recycled milk jugs. The company's average play set contains nearly 25,000 milk jugs, and it diverts over 1 million pounds of HDPE from landfills annually, therefore making it a natural fit for the project.

The installation of recreation areas, including playgrounds and picnic areas, are all part of the privatization project's two-year Immediate Impact Program to bring community-wide improvements to all of Fort Polk's neighborhoods. To date, Play Mart has designed and installed environmentally friendly playgrounds at over a dozen Fort Polk neighborhood centers.

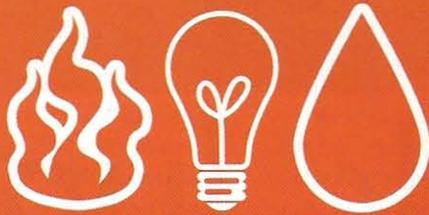
"This is a welcome change from playground structures that were in the old Army housing," says Sarah White, Program Manager for the Residential Communities Initiative at Fort Polk. "They are modern and what today's kids want and need."

The recreation areas serve as the gathering spot for many residents, not just children. They bring a sense of community to the neighborhoods as families come together to watch their children play. Several parents meet for regular play dates at the parks, and family child care providers take the children on outings to the recreation areas.

Beyond the playgrounds

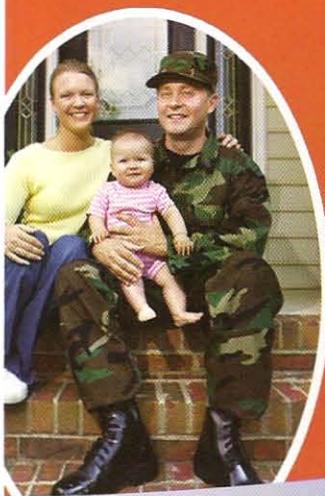
Early projects at Fort Polk included the placement of 240 recycled plastic lumber benches at newly refurbished bus stops. These benches contain more than 300 post-consumer milk jugs and are engraved with the company logo. This

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early statement showed the company's green commitment to the installation's residents and the environmental protection of the area. In addition to complete playground structures, high-quality, low-maintenance recycled plastic lumber products have been used to create picnic tables and waste receptacles. All items consist of up to 100 percent recycled plastic lumber.

"The new, modern play structures in their park-like settings offer a welcome leisure area for people of all ages," says Bob Lewis, who works for Picerne and is the Military Housing Program Director at Fort Polk. "The new recreation areas are like the first flowers of spring after a long winter," he adds. "When the first playground opened it was a sign of more positive things to come."

Green enthusiasm

A side benefit stemming from the new playground sites on post is an increased environmental awareness. The privatization project has partnered with an organization on post called the Children's Environmental Awareness and Health Initiative. Children at the two elementary schools on post have held milk jug recycling competitions, with the winning class at each school receiving a park bench that is made from recycled milk jugs. This new green push, coupled with great new places to play, has resulted in some very enthusiastic kids. The modern recycled plastic play sets are also safer than those they replaced.

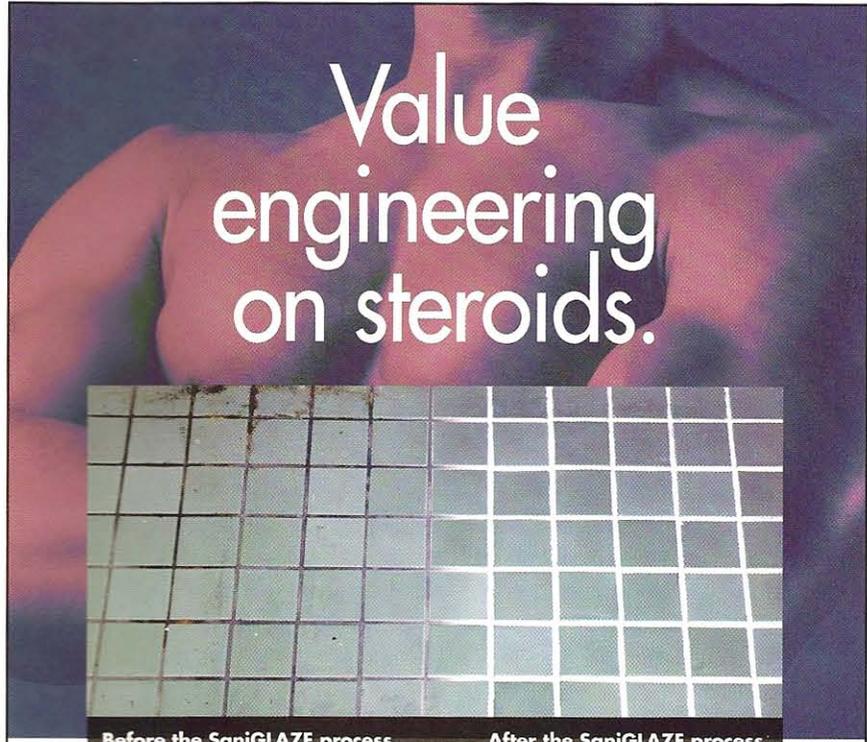
"There are several benefits to these play structures and passive site amenities. Not only are they durable, but children don't get splinters," says Lewis. They're also virtually maintenance-free. Vandalism removal on conventional recreation equipment was often costly and time consuming. Lewis adds, "Artwork created by idle hands is easily removed from the [recycled structural plastic] material."

The partnership is currently working on installing play equipment at 25 smaller parks around Fort Polk's many neighborhoods. The entire initiative has become an effective way to spread the

word about green design and utilizing sustainable resources in successful community construction projects.

Families certainly appreciate the dramatic improvements made to the available amenities on post at Fort Polk. Re-enlisting the family just became easier. ■

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