

THE RESULTS

Without Fort Devens, Ayer's economy would be considerably smaller than it is today. Altogether, 525 jobs (one-fourth of Ayer's labor force) are dependent on economic activity generated by Fort Devens. Of this total, 437 are directly dependent on income received from the Fort and its personnel. These jobs, in turn, generate the need for another 88 workers who provide goods and services for the augmented local population.

Fort Devens' influence is felt in another way. Today Ayer is an area shopping center because it has specialized retail stores offering a variety of lumber, furniture, and automobile products. Also, the town offers specialized services in such fields as dentistry. If, for any reason, Fort Devens were to be completely closed down, many of these larger specialty stores would go out of business. Ayer would lose much of its appeal as a shopping center. Residents from surrounding communities would do most of their shopping elsewhere and many stores and service establishments in Ayer would lose a significant part of their business.

What would the total impact of a Fort Devens closing be on a community such as Ayer? Would 30 percent or more of the labor force be unemployed and move out of the community? The answer is quite clearly no. When Fort Devens closed down after World War II, the economy of Ayer did not collapse and its population did not decline significantly. A number of stores went out of business, but most of the unemployed found work in Fitchburg, Worcester, and nearby labor markets. Many of the replacement jobs were low paying or were otherwise unsatisfactory. Nevertheless, these new jobs brought income into the town of Ayer and kept the economy going.

If Fort Devens had been a large private manufacturing firm rather than a military installation, the economic history of Ayer would have been entirely different. First of all, Ayer would have had a much larger population than it had in 1946. Unlike a military base, private firms generally sublet much of their work to local businessmen. They do not operate commissaries, PX's, and movies. Only occasionally do they build homes for employees. The result is that a much larger part of a private firm's income and that of its employees is spent in the local area and helps to build the local economy.

When a civilian facility with, say, 12,500 employees closes down, however, the local impact is always serious and often disastrous. The complete loss of such a firm might well permanently cripple a town the size of Ayer. On the other hand, a military installation with the same number of employees procures most of its materials and equipment from national markets and provides a great variety of consumer goods and services to its personnel. In short, military facilities are largely self-sufficient and their closing down leaves a much smaller impact on the surrounding communities.

In the case of Fort Devens, however, the installation is far from closing. Recent construction and new training commitments suggest no downturn in economic activity in the foreseeable future.