

Coast Artillery Living History Ft. Hancock, NJ

On 7-9 October 2016, the National Park Service (NPS), in conjunction with the Army Ground Forces Association (AGFA) and other historic organizations, hosted the annual "Fort Hancock Days". This event commemorated the formal renaming of the "Fortifications at Sandy Hook" (also known as the "Military Reservation of Sandy Hook") as "Fort Hancock" by the US War Department on 30 October 1895. The Fort was named in honor of MG Winfield Scott Hancock, a US Army hero of the American Civil War.

The entire Sandy Hook peninsula constitutes the Fort Hancock and Sandy Hook Proving Ground National Historic Landmark.

The members of AGFA who participated in the event were Doug Ciemiecki, Donna Cusano, Paul Cusano, Chris Egan, Doug Houck, Richard King, Henry and Mary Komorowski, Anne Lutkenhouse, Eric Meiselman, Tom Minton, Paul Taylor, Shawn Welch and Bill Winslow. Our guests included Paul Casalese and Kim Parr.

The educational focus was interpreting the Coast Artillery mission at Fort Hancock in the World War Two-era, specifically 1943. The tactical focus of the event was the ongoing U-Boat war, and the threat of saboteur activity or the shelling of Fort Hancock by submarines using deck guns. The event addressed the operation of the Advance Harbor Entrance Control Post ("HECP") Number 1, which was located at Fort Hancock on top of Battery Potter, and the role that Battery Gunnison/New Peck played as Advance HECP #1's Examination Battery. A key element in our interpretation were the 13 separate times that the battery fired upon ships entering the harbor which failed to follow the instructions of the HECP.

The photo below shows the majority of the participants and guests on Saturday, 8 October at our barracks with the Sandy Hook Lighthouse behind us.



Preparation work began on Friday afternoon (7 Oct). In the photo below, our friend, Brian Samuelson, who has the first building lease at Fort Hancock (www.sandyhookrentals.com), came by to help us set up for the event.



Below CPL Paul Cusano carries tools up to the gun platform as Brian Samuelson works on installing telephone cables to the Gun #1 Elevation Board Operator's position.



As the gun platform is being readied for the Lantern Tour, SGT Minton adjusts the M1904 telescopic sight and CPL Cusano prepares to finish installation of the gun carriage lighting system.



SGT Minton, CPL Cusano and Brian Samuelson continue installation of lights and telephone equipment on the gun carriage.



Here, T-5 Richard King installs a c. 1915 platform light for Gun No. 1. This is one of only four such lights restored in the nation, all of which are at Battery Gunnison/ New Peck. He and T-5 Komorowski developed a new method for safely and efficiently mounting the platform lights this past fall.



As we continued preparations, 1LT Lutkenhouse, 1LT Winslow, 2LT Cusano and T-5 King discuss activities at Fort Hancock with Betsy Barrett, the President of the Sandy Hook Foundation, the official friends group of Sandy Hook and the NPS.



Our friend John Schneider also paid us a visit. John has been the driving force behind a series of short educational movies about the history of Fort Hancock and the Sandy Hook Peninsula. Below he “interviews” the “nurses of Fort Hancock”.



Once the interview is completed, 1LT Lutkenhouse and 2LT Cusano carry their equipment back to their station in preparation for the evening Lantern Tour.



Starting at about 1700 hours, we served our “dinner chow” prior to departing for the Lantern Tour. The meal is served in the magazine, and eaten outside. 1LT Taylor is heading to eat while 1LT Lutkenhouse, CPL Egan and 1LT Winslow get their evening meal.



CPL Egan and 1LT Lutkenhouse chat while eating. Evening chow is when the final reviews are made prior to departing for the Lantern Tour. In the foreground the stew pot rests atop a Coleman 500 “Speedmaster” stove from 1940.



Just prior to departure, LTC Welch looks over the harbor from Gun No. 1.



Just before we start the evening's event, we took time for a photo. This group would split to become two teams, one that walked with the public on the 2 mile lantern tour, and one that prepared and received the public once they arrived at Battery Gunnison/New Peck.



Just prior to our departure, LT(jg) Casalese stood ready to instruct visitors on the capabilities and responsibilities of the US Coast Guard at New York Harbor in 1943.



The tour team is shown below, enroute to the Post Guardhouse where we will meet the public. CPL Egan, CPL Cusano, 2LT Parr and SGT Minton stand next to the foundation for one of Fort Hancock's many fire control towers. This one was demolished in the 1960s.



As the Lantern Tour is a very popular event, visitors began arriving 15 minutes before the tour was to begin.



As visitors gathered, LTC Welch began with a basic orientation and explained what was happening at Fort Hancock in 1943. Notice the large red and yellow projectile below. It is one of the earliest 16-inch shells from about 1904, and it prompted our visitors to ask detailed questions about the US Army's development and use of 16" guns and ammunition from the early 1900's through WWII.



The size of the tour group just before we started our walk is apparent below - and this was only half of who ultimately attended. At this point, we had counted about 100 people.



At left below, LTC Welch and CPL Cusano light our lanterns, while on the right CPL Egan holds a 1940's period Coleman lantern next to a fortification's thick concrete wall. The use of vintage lanterns helps intensify the historic ambiance of the 1943 setting as darkness falls.



Below, SGT Minton discusses various aspects of Soldier Life as we pass through the Main Post area with the public. The tour group continued to grow as we walked.



The size of the tour is apparent in this photograph taken inside the walls of the Harbor Defense Command Post (mortar battery). By this time, we counted 150 visitors.



Once we arrived at the Sandy Hook Proving Ground gun test line, we lost count at about 250 visitors.



When the public arrived at Battery Gunnison/New Peck, they filled the Battery Parade area. Below, 1LT Taylor provides the initial in-briefing prior to touring.



With over 250 visitors, the battery was filled to capacity. Visitors moved from one area of the battery to another in groups and individually. Gun #1 platform (below) shows the effect of the restored platform lights and the on-carriage fire control lights.



As you can see below, the Gun #1 platform can hold a large number of visitors. SGT Minton stands on the other side of the open breach and explains the basic workings of the gun as it applies today. Notice his helmet is off - he is in "hats off," meaning that he is speaking from the present day perspective.



This view, taken from the road, shows the size and scale of our visiting group. This is about half the group as many people are inside the battery rooms proper.



Inside the Plotting Room, the public learned about the equipment and fire control process. In this photo the average group size is visible - about 30 people total gathered around the plotting board for each talk.



In the magazine, another 30 or so visitors listen to 1LT Winslow as he discussed the ammunition stored inside.



The medical station, located in the Chemical Warfare Room saw extensive visiting by groups of 10 to 12 people. Below, a young visitor tries on a medic's belt and helmet.



The photograph below shows the medical display, including the vintage c. 1943 Picker Field X-Ray machine.



The visitors really enjoyed the discussions and vintage equipment and we were very happy to share our knowledge and meet new friends!



Another view of the medical station shows the multitude of vintage 1930's and 1940's Army medical equipment.



At about 2100 hours, we gathered the public visitors on the Battery Parade. Below SGT Minton and CPL Egan discuss how AGFA operates to restore and preserve the Battery and to answer final questions.



This view of SGT Minton and CPL Egan was taken from the top of the Battery Commander's Station as the crowd gathered around the two NCOs.



At 2200 hours, we were finally finished for the night. Below, T-5 King prepares to break down the Gun #1 platform and return the equipment to storage. Note how well lit the area is, all from original or period correct light fixtures restored and installed by AGFA members.



Another great lantern tour comes to an end as we look over Gun #1 at the New York City skyline. Notice the restored gun carriage and battery lighting as it illuminates both the gun and the Battery proper.



This photo shows the back of the Battery traverse and final close down operations at about 2200 hours. It had been a very long night, but worth every moment.



By 2230 we were back in the barracks discussing the day over cheese and crackers and good conversation. To the left T5 Komorowski references a training manual, while CPL Meiselman, 1LT Lutkenhouse and 1LT Taylor chat about the Lantern Tour.



On Saturday AGFA conducted its annual meeting. Just prior to gaveling to order, LTC Welch, CPL Meiselman, CPL Egan and SSG Houck stand next to our WW2-era Coast Artillery Flag.



During the meeting, we recognize the achievements of our membership to include certificates and awards. Below SGT Minton receives recognition for his superior dedication and accomplishments during the year.



1LT Winslow, SSG Houck, CPT Cusano, SGT Minton, LTC Welch, Mrs. Komorowski and T-5 Komorowski prepare for the discussions.



PVT Ciemniecki, SGT Minton, 2LT Parr, T-5 Komorowski, CPL Egan and Mrs. Komorowski are shown as we begin to frame and plan our activities and restoration work for 2017.



As the meeting continues, 2LT Cusano and 1LT Taylor are shown in front of the WWII-era US (48 star) flag and the Coast Artillery flag.



After the meeting, we held our annual dinner at the mess hall for the Marine Academy of Science and Technology (MAST), also located at Fort Hancock. This building is a restored c. 1941 mess hall reused for its original purpose - feeding soldiers! Our guests below include Pete McCarthy (senior Fort Hancock NPS coordinator), Jennifer Nersesian (Gateway Superintendent) and her family, Mark Stuart of the Monmouth Hills Association, and John Schneider who has been authoring historic documentaries about Sandy Hook's history.



As the members gathered, conversation was lively. Below 1LT Taylor, PVT Ciemniecki, SSG Houck and 1LT Lutkenhouse chat.



Another view of the restored 1941 mess hall with AGFA members and guests chatting and enjoying themselves prior to dinner.



Once dinner was ready, members and guests proceeded through the line. Below 1LT Lutkenhouse, Mark Stewart, Jen Nersesian, T5 King and 2LT Cusano move through the line.



Members and guests are seated below and enjoying a good laugh together.



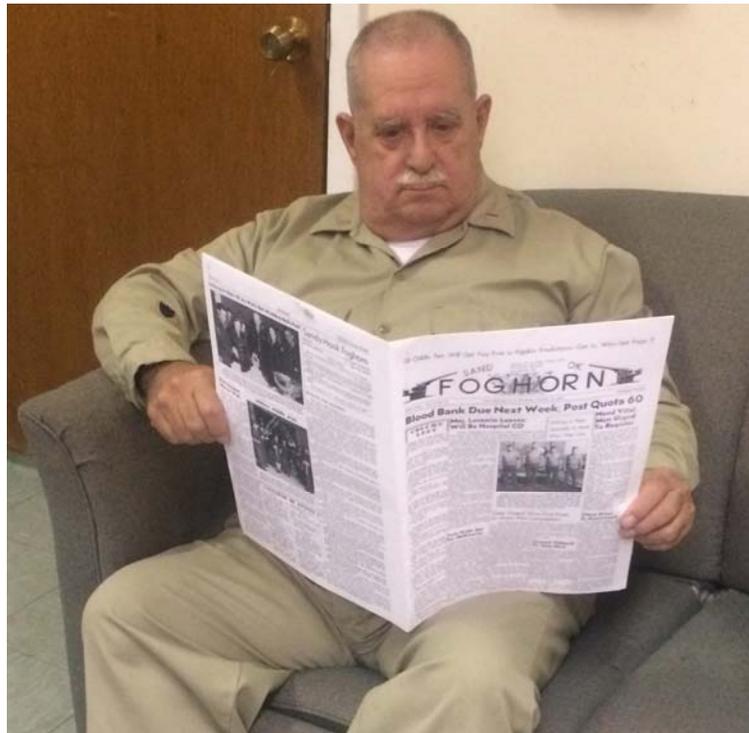
The next morning dawned early, but not so bright. In a pouring rain, we all prepared for Fort Hancock Day operations. Below Mrs. Komorowski, 2LT Parr and T5 Komorowski chat in the kitchen.



Breakfast included large servings of eggs, toast, fruit and deer bologna as a special gift of 2LT Parr.



As we finished breakfast, LT(jg) Paul Casalese paused to read the October 14 October 1943 Sandy Hook FogHorn - the weekly magazine of Fort Hancock during WW2, written and published exclusively by the enlisted Soldiers stationed at the Fort.



As we prepared to leave the barracks, Honorary AGFA Member Francis Hayes stopped in on his way to the Battery. A WWII Veteran of the Battle of the Bulge, he spent a much of his teenage years at Fort Hancock in the late 1930s. Because of the heavy rain, he decided to save his display for a dry day - we are looking forward to May!



The rains began on Saturday evening and continued well into Sunday. We assumed the public would not visit us - incorrect! Upon arriving at the Battery, we were astounded to find visitors waiting for us prior to opening up at noon! Notice the visitors below are very wet from the rain.



We had small groups visit us throughout the day. Below 1LT Taylor explains the operations of the plotting room to the visitors as PFC Ciemniecki observes.



As a special bonus, our visitors were treated to operating the vintage fire control telephone system. In the photo below, a young boy and his mother try the battery's EE-91 fire control telephones and their HS-17 head /chest sets.



Sometimes it takes time to fit the head/chest sets...and the kids really enjoy this!



Two young plotting board operators experience 80 year old technology in the plotting room at Battery Gunnison/New Peck. Hard line telephones and pre-calculator math are always a hit with the younger generations.



And in addition to the younger visitors, those of a more mature age also enjoy working with the vintage telephone equipment.



The machine shop always gets strong interest. Surrounded by WW2 era equipment, T-5 Komorowski and CPL Cusano stand with a photo of a front line combat machine shop built into an Army truck, somewhere in the Pacific Theater during WW2. Many of the tools are the same.



T-5 Komorowski spends time working with the public. He takes special time to allow our visitors to actually work "hands on" with a portion of a project.



The Aid Station had a steady flow of visitors through the day. Below 2LT Cusano speaks with a visitor.



Below 1LT Lutkenhouse and 2LT Cusano speak to a group of visitors inside the Aid Station.



Due to the heavy rains, we were unable to have Gun No. 1 open for display. This allowed us to focus on interpreting other areas of the Battery, such as the Powder and Shell magazines. AGFA members took turns giving tours, and below, CPL Cusano shows visitors the shell hoist for Gun #2, restored to working condition by AGFA in 2005.



Here, LTC Welch explains a cut away drawing of an armor piercing shell to the visitors. There were several types of shells stored here, all displayed by WWII-era diagrams on the walls for our visitors.



In the two photos below, LTC Welch takes apart a small 3-inch armor piercing shell to show the ballistic cap and the armor piercing component of the shell.



Families were the highlight of Sunday. Below a family stops for a few minutes inside the powder magazine.



The rain stopped shortly before we closed for the day - a big help for packing. Below 1LT Lutkenhouse spreads out her packing cases and prepares to load her personal collection of vintage WWII medical equipment.



Once everything was loaded and put away, PVT Ciemniecki, CPL Cusano, 1LT Lutkenhouse, 2LT Cusano and 1LT Taylor chatted about the end of a great event.



Another wonderful and productive year has drawn to an end at Battery Gunnison/ New Peck and Fort Hancock. As Sunday came to a close, the eight members who hosted the public throughout the day prepare to lock the doors and plan for next year. We will see you in 2017!!



Throughout the winter of 2016-17, AGFA members and US National Park Rangers will be conducting work periods at Battery Gunnison/ New Peck. For additional information, please call the Sandy Hook Visitor Center at (732) 872-5970, visit the park website at <https://www.nps.gov/gate/planyourvisit/index.htm> or visit the Army Ground Forces Association Website at <http://armygroundforces.org>.

Additional information and scheduling can also be found on the Battery Gunnison Facebook Page, "Battery John Gunnison," at <https://www.facebook.com/Battery-John-Gunnison-168775819848014/>