

Coast Artillery Living History Ft. Hancock, NJ

On 18-20 May 2012, the National Park Service in conjunction with the Army Ground Forces Association (AGFA) conducted the annual spring Coastal Defense Days at Fort Hancock, NJ. Coastal Defense Days showcase Fort Hancock's rich military heritage using tours and programs at various locations throughout Fort Hancock at Sandy Hook in Highlands, NJ.

The members of AGFA that participated in the event were Ron Brodzinski, Chris Egan, Anne Lutkenhouse, Eric Meiselman, Tom Minton, Kyle Schafer, Gary Weaver, Deanna Weaver, Shawn Welch, Luis Ramos, Joe Rosamilia and our guests Phil Hillman, Meg Pigg, Anthony Valenti, Donna Cusano, and Paul Cusano. The educational objective was to provide interpretation of the Coast Artillery mission at Fort Hancock in the World War Two era with a focus on the movement and activation of the two 6" rapid fire M1900 guns from Battery Peck to Battery Gunnison in April and May 1943 – creating Battery Gunnison/New Peck! The guns were moved to this site to give them a greater field of fire in the defense of New York Harbor and provide crucial watch over of the entrance to Ambrose and Sandy Hook shipping Channels. The tactical focus of the event was the ongoing U-boat war in the Battle Of The Atlantic, and the threat of saboteur activity or the shelling of Fort Hancock by German submarines using deck guns. The event also addressed the operation of the Advance Harbor Entrance Control Post ("HECP") Number 1, which was located at Fort Hancock, and the role that Battery Peck/Gunnison played as Advance HECP #1's Examination Battery.

The weekend presented itself as a milestone achievement for AGFA, and for the first time consisted of three major events. First was the semi-annual Harbor Defense Lantern Tour on Friday evening. Over 200 people attended this event, the highest attendance we have ever had to date. The second was a WWII "USO-Like" Swing Dance held in the 1941 constructed Post Chapel. This dance was the first of its kind for AGFA and was a huge success both in attendance and as a fund raiser for AGFA projects. The finale was Sunday's "Coastal Defense Day" when Association members manned Battery Gunnison/New Peck as it would have been manned in May 1943.

The photo below shows the participating membership on Sunday afternoon 20 May in front of Gun #1 of Battery Gunnison/New Peck.



As has become our practice, Friday's daylight hours were spent executing several restoration projects. Below LTC Welch stands next to a newly restored and installed c. 1915 Corps of Engineers (COE) wall light fixture in the powder passage of Gun #1. This was one of two wall lights that were located and restored to replace similar COE standard ceiling lights. AGFA has obtained and re-installed a large number of 1915 Standard COE ceiling lights; however, the magazine for Battery Gunnison/New Peck was wired almost exclusively for wall lights. Over time we will replace the ceiling lights as we continue to locate and restore wall lights.



A second 1915 standard COE wall light was installed in the entrance to Gun #1 shell hoist and magazine. The Gun No. 1 side (or right-hand side) of the Shell and Powder Magazines, as well as the Powder Passage, have been exclusively rewired not only with these original fixtures, but with cables that have been run along original pathways and using original 1915-era US Army COE cable hangers.



In the photo below, the tour group is guided through the concession area. PVT Meiselman in his full combat uniform guides and informs the visitors.



With the tour group being so large, several large groups of visitors were created to do “round robin” tours of the four major interpretive station of the battery. However, we still ended up large amounts of visitors at each station waiting to enter after each group moved through – so the AGFA team was very, very busy. Below 2LT Lutkenhouse explains medical aspects to a group of about 30 that was “jammed” into the small space in the Chemical Warfare Room set up as an aid station.



Below SGT Minton provides instructions to a tour group on how the plotting room and plotting board were used to generate fire-control data for the guns. Trigonometry in the pre-computer age is always a unique aspect of the tour for visitors. Each AGFA member was able to be clear, sharp and concise, and still keep the crowds moving efficiently.



Below a group enters the Gun #1 magazine entrance. The new wall light is visible in the back as is the shell hoist which is under restoration by AGFA.



The tour group, led by PVT Meiselman, receives information on the various shells – both High-Explosive (HE) and Armor-Piercing (AP) - used by the battery. A stack of approximately 170 high explosive shells (inert) is in the right of the photo – the shells weigh about 85 pounds each without explosive filler and the whole stack is about 7 tons. These were donated to AGFA several years ago by the Joint Munitions Command and remain a centerpiece of our interpretive displays



Another group, led by PVT Egan, enters the powder room of the magazine and learns about the storage and surveillance of powder. Though generally stable, the “nitro-cellulose” propelling charges wrapped in canvas and weighing 32 or 37 pounds each would be stored in the metal canisters and monitored closely. Each powder grain is generally as large as your smallest finger. A highly temperamental chemical mixture once deterioration started, the nitro based propellant powder needed special care and protocol to ensure that it would be ready for combat use at any moment. Once the powder failed surveillance tests, the soldiers would request new powder and dispose of the failed powder by burning it on site using purpose built trays.



From the powder room in the magazine, visitors enter the powder passage and exit at the base of Gun #1 firing platform. Below visitors climb the stairs to the top of the gun platform. Again, the size of the tour group is quite evident here.



The group then arrives at the top of the platform and Gun #1. This group is gathered around the breach area of the gun and receives technical information on the M1900's capabilities from SSGT Weaver, the NCOIC for this section of the tour..



Saturday was spent preparing for the WWII USO-Like Swing Dance in the evening. Below, 2LT Lutkenhouse, Mrs. Weaver, 2LT Cusano and PFC Ramos prepare the entrance, the refreshments and display areas. The dance was held in the beautifully restored 1941 wooden “temporary” Post Chapel. It is one of only five such buildings to survive of the several hundred built at Fort Hancock during WWII.



Below, PFC Ramos, 1LT Cusano (as an Army Air Force Doctor) and Recruit Schafer prepare the “war bond tickets” for the entrance station. No matter what, every military force has a paper trail – AGFA is no exception! The tickets were to be used in the door prize raffles for the dance.



The Swing Dance evening begins as 2LT Lutkenhouse in an Army Nurse's summer off duty uniform welcomes the 'early birds' to the swing dance lesson. 2LT Lutkenhouse was the primary organizer and coordinator of this swing dance, and we thank her for all of her efforts to make it come together.



Below Mrs. Schafer and T4 Cusano greet "President and Mrs. Harding" as they sign into the dance and make a donation to AGFA. The Hardings are unique in the historical community, as they are the only President & Mrs Harding historical interpreters in the world; they are "regulars" at Fort Hancock for various historical events throughout the year, and came out to support AGFA and the dance. The M-1 helmet on the table held "war bond ticket stubs" for the three gift raffles held during the night.



All members attending from AGFA were part of the preparation team and were instrumental in making the dance such a success. SSG Weaver, PVT Meiselman, 1LT Cusano (as an Army Air Force doctor) and Recruit Schafer are pictured below at the entrance to the 1941 T-Series chapel where the dance was held.



The dance actually began with a swing dance lesson taught by Jerry and Nancy Flood from the local swing dance circles. They are the couple in the center of the dance floor, she wearing a red sweater/blue skirt and he wearing a tan vest with striped tie. The lesson ran from 1900 to 1940 hours and was a great ice breaker.



At 1940 hours, PVT Egan welcomed the attendees, and introduced everyone to the Band, [Swingadelic](http://www.swingadelic.com) (www.swingadelic.com), who provided outstanding entertainment all evening long.



At 2030, 2130 and 2200 hours respectively, raffles for a Swing Music CD were held. Here 2LT Lutkenhouse holds the M1 helmet filled with ticket stubs from the "Donation Bond" each visitor was given after with their donation contribution while the band's piano player draws a winning ticket.



Below our first raffle winner with her swing era music CD poses with her prize and 2nd LT Lutkenhouse .



Below PVT Meiselman, 1LT Cusano, PVT Egan and T5 Valenti stand by to keep the thermoses full of water for quenching dancers' thirst and otherwise maintain the refreshment area.



The large number of attendees, as seen from the choir loft is evident below as the dance floor was packed.



Another view off the dance floor taken later in the evening shows people continuing to dance, but also secure refreshments and talking at the tables. The event brought together a wide and eclectic mix of living-historians, reenactors, swing dancers and history buffs - a perfect environment to showcase Fort Hancock's amazing history.



Seen from the choir loft, PFC Ramos explains the operations of an M1910A1 Azimuth Instrument to a guest at the exhibit table, which showcased AGFA's work at Ft. Hancock as well as original Coast Artillery artifacts.



In the photo below, the team that pulled the dance together poses for a final photo under the US and Coast Artillery Flags. Pictured left to right are PVT Meiselman, SSG Weaver, T4 Cusano, PVT Egan, 2LT Lutkenhouse, LTC Welch, Dave Post (Swingadelic), RCT Schafer, T5 Valenti, 1LT Cusano, PFC Ramos (sitting) and SGT Minton. At center stage is a 6" HE shell, part of AGFA's display.



Sunday morning saw the membership arise and prepare for the full interpretive Coastal Defense Day event. Below PVT Meiselman and T5 Valenti load the 1942 marmite (food container) with ice for the day, as the forecast called for hot weather.



At Battery Gunnison/New Peck, PFC Ramos manages the access control gate and prepares visitors for entrance to the battery and 1943. As his helmet is "off," he is speaking to them from a 2012-perspective.



The first display area that visitors encountered was the 1942 Dodge ambulance and 2LT Lutkenhouse's medical station.



Below 2LT Lutkenhouse in a WWII Nurse's seersucker duty uniform makes final touches on the aidstation before the public arrives at the battery.



During the day on Sunday SSG Weaver provided detailed information on the plotting room.



Below, PVT Egan, SGT Minton and RCT Schafer prepare the gun platform for visitors. Notice the simulated powder bag on the gun platform in the center foreground.



Preparations on the gun platform continue as the public arrives.



Below, a member of the public tracks a ship using the M1904 telescopic sight as others learn about the gun in totality.



After a gun drill a member of the public continues to track a ship, traversing the M1900 6-inch seacoast rifle as the vessel moves, while PVT Egan and SGT Minton discuss the gun with visitors. RCT Schafer prepares to greet visitors coming up the stairs to the gun platform.



Throughout the day groups of visitors constantly entered the battery area. Here 2LT Lutkenhouse demonstrates a manual ventilator (a rare item from 1943; similar to the “Bag-Valve-Mask” or BVM that medical personnel use today) to the public in the “aid station” located inside the Chemical Warfare Room.



A key element of interpretation is public participation in the gun drills. Below, T4 Brodzinski shows two young visitors how to properly pick up the shell tray with an inert practice shell on it. To the right PVT Egan holds the 34 pound powder bag.



Below PVT Meiselman teams up with a visitor for a two-person carry on the rammer staff. PVT Cusano stands ready to man the sponge rod.



Below, a mixed detail of AGFA coast artillery soldiers and the public prepare to run a gun drill. As a visitor swabs out the powder chamber, T4 Brodzinski, T5 Valenti, and two young men hold the shell tray. PVT Egan holds the powder bag, SGT Minton stands by at the breach and RCT Schafer tracks a ship while listening for instructions from the plotting room below.



The detail continues preparation and to the left PVT Meiselman and the head of the shell rammer can be seen.



Below the team carrying the shell has advanced to the breach area and PVT Meiselman runs forward (left) with the rammer to "seat" the shell into its correct location against the rifling inside the gun.



Below, PVT Meiselman and a member of the public ram the shell into the gun.



Below the team stands back from the breach, as SGT Minton places an inert primer into the firing device and prepares to “fire” the gun at the ship in the channel being tracked by RCT Schafer.



After the drill, the inevitable happens...the shell has to be removed! Below PVT Cusano stands ready with a ramming shaft that has a hook on the end to grab a loop on the back of the shell and pull it out of the gun.



Another detail prepares for a gun drill. Below three young ladies are on the “swab” and are ready to rinse out the breach and clear of it “burning powder residue” as soon as SGT Minton opens it at the start of the next drill.



Simulating the soldiers’ stance to respond to the firing pressure, PVT Cusano and PVT Meiselman turn away from the gun, covering their ears.



At around 1630 hours, with another successful weekend of preservation and interpretation behind us, AGFA begins to return tools and materials to their proper storage sites inside the Battery structure, PVT Egan is seen here as he prepares to carry a few final tools down from the gun platform.



Throughout the summer of 2012 through Labor Day, AGFA members and US National Park Rangers will be offering guided tours of Battery Gunnison/ New Peck. The Battery will be open on Saturdays from 1PM to 8PM. For additional information call the Sandy Hook Visitor Center at (732) 872-5970 or by visiting <http://www.nps.gov/gate/planyourvisit/upload/GATEsummerguide2012REV-online-Sandy-Hook.pdf>.

For more information, visit the Army Ground Forces Association Website <http://armygroundforces.org>