

Coast Artillery Living History **Ft. Hancock, NJ**

On 29-30 October 2011, the National Park Service (NPS), in conjunction with the Army Ground Forces Association (AGFA), conducted the annual Fort Hancock Day public event weekend at Battery Gunnison/New Peck, Fort Hancock, NJ. This event is held annually by the NPS to commemorate the founding of Fort Hancock on 30 October 1895 in honor of Major General Winfield Scott Hancock, a Union hero of the American Civil War.

The members of AGFA that participated in the event were Andy Bennett, Chris Egan, Doug Houck, Max Kaiserman, Henry Komorowski, Kathleen Kluxen, Francisco Lacy, Anne Lutkenhouse, Eric Meiselman, Tom Minton, Luis Ramos, Deanna Schafer, Kyle Schafer, Gary Weaver, Shawn Welch, and Larry Winchell. 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 role of Battery Gunnison/New Peck as the Examination Battery of the harbor defenses. In this capacity, on 20 October 1943, the battery actually fired upon two different ships that were not following directions, on orders from the Harbor Entrance Control Post (HECP). This high tension action was portrayed for the public during realistic gun drills on Sunday. The tactical focus of the event was supporting the ongoing U-boat war by guarding against the threat of saboteur activity or the shelling of Fort Hancock by submarine deck guns. The Friday evening Harbor Defense Lantern Tour also interpreted the Harbor Defense Command Post (located inside the mortar battery), the operation of the Advance Harbor Entrance Control Post Number 1, which was located on top of Battery Potter at Fort Hancock, and the role that Battery Peck/Gunnison played as Advance HECP #1's Examination Battery.

The event began with the first members arriving on Thursday evening and Friday morning. Equipment was secured, the vintage 1942 WWII Dodge ambulance was "activated", communications cables were connected and telephones installed on the No. 1 gun platform. The battery was brought to "general readiness" by 1600 in the afternoon in time for dinner and the hosting of the semi-annual night time "Harbor Defenses Lantern Tour" for the public. On Saturday evening the Army Ground Forces Association conducted its annual business meeting. On Saturday the battery was open to the public while the members practiced gun drills, plotting room operations and prepared for Sunday. Sunday afternoon Battery Gunnison/New Peck was open to the public at "Condition One" with accurate first-person interpretation of gun loading demonstrations and interpretation of an Exam Battery firing action.

The photo below shows the participating membership on Sunday 30 October in front of Gun #1, a 6-inch M1900 seacoast rifle manufactured in 1903 and modified during the late 1930s. This gun, and its sister, Gun #2 of the battery, are the last of their kind.



Work began in earnest on Friday afternoon (28 October) with completing the installation of the 1915 Corps of Engineers electric panel box being a key project. Below, T-5 Komorowski continues the activation of the newly installed panel box. The box was fully operational for the event, and is now running most of the electric service at the Battery, further adding to the authenticity of the structure.



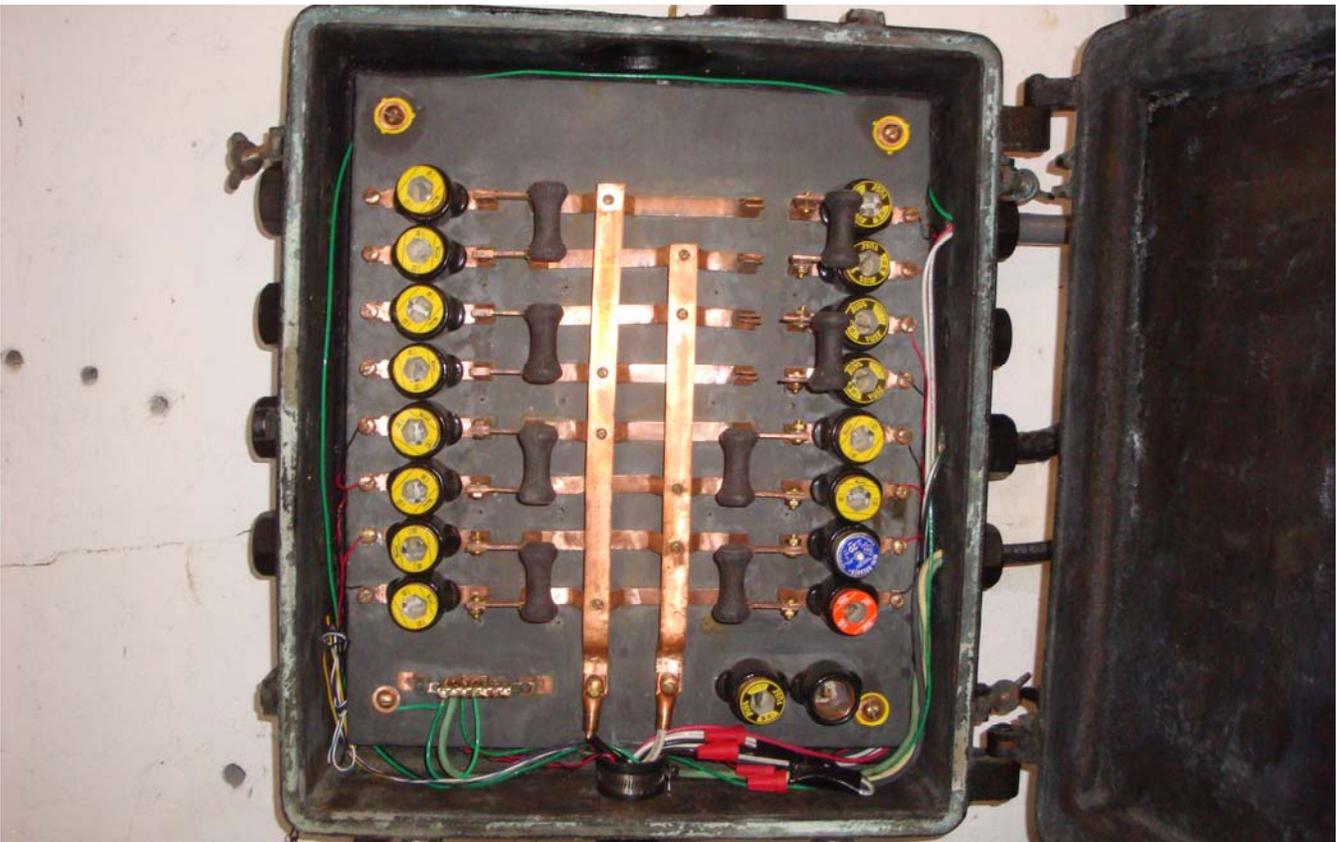
In the photo below, T-5 Komorowski, LTC Welch, and PVT Kaiserman are pulling cable through the conduit to enable controlling of lights in the tool room, chemical warfare room and the magazine from the Corps of Engineers panel box. Completion during this event marked a major milestone in the ongoing restoration of the Battery.



Below LTC Welch and T-5 Komorowski continue to pull cable through the conduit to activate the box.



In this photo, the panel box is shown open. This is an 8-circuit box, as denoted by the 8 individual knife switches. Very few of these survive nationwide, and even fewer are in working condition. This box has been meticulously restored. In order to maintain a safe working environment for the public and NPS Rangers, the box is actually powered with 12 volts DC current. The 110 volt lines pass through the Corps of Engineers Panel Box to a small grey box outside of the new 100 amp main service panel to a newer, smaller box containing 12 volt switches. The knife switches in the 1915 COE box are used to actuate the 12 volt switches in the small box, which in turn, power the whole Battery. This makes a safe, effective and electric code compliant system while retaining historic functionality.



In the photo below, 2LT Lutkenhouse finishes the setup of her medical station inside the Chemical Warfare room. Another major topic of interpretation at Battery Gunnison/New Peck is Military Medical Service.



And inside the 1942 Dodge Ambulance, 2LT Lutkenhouse continues the setup of her displays.



In keeping with the spirit of the season, PVT Meiselman carries the battery pumpkin. Coast Artillery units took great pride in their individual batteries and regiments, and such a scene, so close to Halloween, would not have been out of order for the soldiers at Fort Hancock.



As one can see below, the pumpkin has a very Coast Artillery appearance! It was artfully cut by PVT Kathleen Kluxen.



The semi-annual "Harbor Defense Lantern Tour" held Friday night, has become one of the most popular events of the year at Fort Hancock. This unique after-hours program enhances the historic atmosphere of the Fort; the tour is conducted via "first person interpretation," with visitors and AGFA members solidly locked into a 1943 time frame in discussion and action. The tour originates at the Fort Guardhouse, formerly the Fort Hancock Museum, before traveling to the Harbor Defense Command Post, Battery Gunnison/New Peck, and the Harbor Entrance Control Post. Beginning at 1830, the lantern tour group receives instructions from CPL Minton outside the post guard house.



Upon arrival at Battery Gunnison/ New Peck, the night lantern tour group receives medical information from 2LT Lutkenhouse.



Inside the plotting room, SGT Bennett and CPL Minton explain the plotting room functions to the public. There were so many participants on the tour that all four stations – Medical, Plotting Room, Magazines and Gun Platform – had simultaneous visitors throughout the visit.



The effectiveness of the new electrical service upgrade and the 1915 vintage Corps of Engineers lighting installation is very apparent in this view, taken from the “Battery Parade” or rear. From the left is the lighting inside the Chemical Warfare room, silhouetting the ambulance. The center door is that of the Plotting Room. The door on the far right is the magazine entrance, and the two platform lights provide illumination on the back of the gun platform. This is much as the battery would have looked in 1943.



Below, lantern tour visitors enjoy the ambiance of the new parapet-mounted 1915 era Corps of Engineers lights on the front of the gun platform.



In addition to the new forward lighting on the platform, which consists of three fully restored and functional 1915-era Corps of Engineers lights (which are temporary, and at the end of an event are removed for storage and maintenance), we see the illuminated skyline of Brooklyn and Queens in the far distance under the gun tube.



Saturday morning SSG Houck, 2LT Lutkenhouse and T-5 Komorowski gather around SGT Bennett as he shows photos of his other living history group, the Airborne Demonstration Team (<http://www.wwiad.t.org/>). Notice the vintage 1920's coffee pot to the left. Coffee at the ready is a constant requirement during events.



Friday's projects, and the subsequent lantern tour, proved a hard, but very enjoyable day for all. When AGFA members awoke Saturday morning to driving winds with torrential rains and sleet, as seen in the following photo taken from our barracks, the group took the opportunity to enjoy a slower morning pace for a change. The US Army would also use weather conditions such as these to rest the troops and focus on indoor activities, such as classroom instruction, if practical. The Army also would conduct more combat realistic training in this weather depending upon the training schedule and status of readiness of the unit.



Before long, it also began to snow. Unseasonable frosty precipitation and temperatures notwithstanding, SGT Lacy and PVT Kaiserman took this in stride.



Work at Battery Gunnison/New Peck on Saturday was very wet as can be seen by the water on SSG Houck's M1941 jacket. SGT Bennett moves a EE-91 telephone in preparation for plotting board training.



As the day progressed, the temperature continued to plummet and the precipitation only increased. Below PVT Kaiserman, LTC Welch and T-5 Komorowski (wearing SGT Strips) begin work on the COE panel box after having done some work outside in the rain. As we were essentially forced inside all day, members opted to use this time to perfect skills and training on the M3 Plotting Board, and other equipment in the Plotting Room.



As members work within the plotting room, 2LT Lutkenhouse looks outside the plotting room door as the sleet drives diagonally across the camera's view. The rain is most noticeable in diagonal streaks across the photo. Surprisingly, AGFA members hosted 5 park visitors who braved the bad weather to tour Fort Hancock.



During the rain storm, the membership works on perfecting plotting board operations and fire control. In the photo below, CPL Minton, PVT Meiselman, T-5 Komorowski, 2LT Lutkenhouse and SGT Bennett conduct plotting board drills.



After completing plotting board instruction, the members take time out to eat and plan additional work. The midday meal consisted of hot coffee, soup, and sandwiches, which were a welcome relief, as even the interior temperature of the Battery had dropped into the low 40s.



Below the membership takes time out for a group photo at the plotting board. Notice the battery pumpkin is lit.



The October event weekend is also the AGFA annual meeting and dinner. As the freezing rain drove on throughout the night, members and special guests prepare to enjoy a hot catered meal on period Army mess wear. The dinner was held in the Fort Hancock Firehouse, built in 1896.



In the forefront of the picture below, 2LT Lutkenhouse, PVT Meiselman and NPS Park Coordinator Pete McCarthy enjoy the dinner and talk shop.



Below AGFA Board Members SSG Hock and 1LT Bennett enjoy their meal prior to the start of the meeting. The unusual little bird at the bottom center of the photo is the "Oozlefinch" legendary mascot of the Coast Artillery. Thorough out the Coast Artillery's history, during all official meetings and regimental dinners such as this, a statue of this honorable bird would be placed prominently in the meeting or dining area so that he might observe, and if need be, chime in on the discussion. For more information about this unique and legendary figure, please visit: <http://cdsg.org/reprint%20PDFs/CACLore.pdf>



From left to right are Recruit Schafer, Deanna Schafer, SSG Weaver, CPL Minton, Miss Kluxen, SGT Lacey and PFC Ramos.



Below PVT Kaiserman and SGT Lacey pose with the serious expressions of dignified Coast Artillery soldiers during the Annual Dinner.



1LT Bennett emphasizes a point during the opening of the meeting.



After the meeting the membership took time to pose for a photograph.



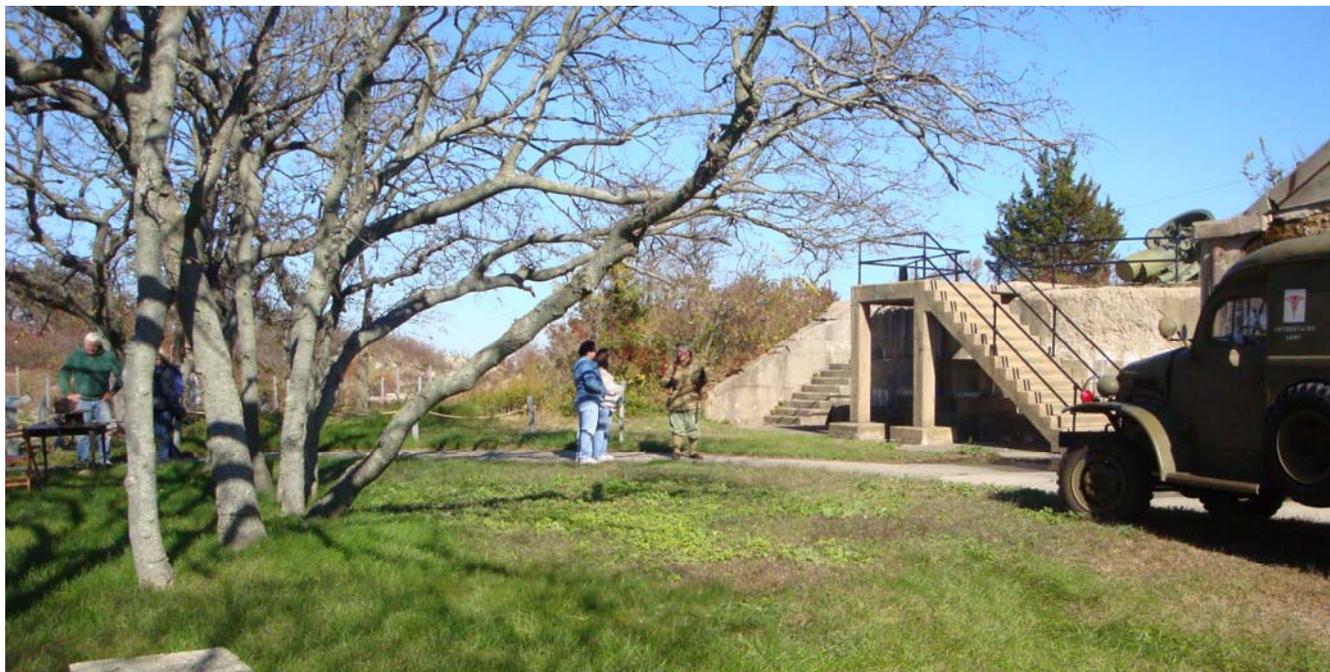
On Sunday morning members prepare for the day over breakfast and talking about various aspects of the event and the Coast Artillery Corps.



Breakfast continues in the barracks below with PVT Kluxen, Sara Winchell, wife of CPL Winchell, his wife Sara, PVT Kluxen and PVT Egan enjoying the fellowship and camaraderie.



The rain dried out during the night, and Sunday, unlike Saturday, is a most beautiful day. Below the public begins entering the battery area.



SSG Weaver welcomes visitors into the Chemical Warfare Room and LT Lutkenhouse's medical station.



Below PVT Meiselman and SGT Bennett prepare for public interpretation on Gun #1.



Here, CPL Winchell and T-5 Komorowski go over basic operations regarding the M3 Plotting Board prior to the arrival of the public.



Inside the plotting room, T-5 Komorowski conducts plotting board instruction for the public. Below he is kneeling on top of the board as the Plotter (sergeant in charge of the plotting room detail) would have done in 1943 when generating firing data.



Working with T-5 Komorowski, members of the public wearing the HS-17 head sets of the fire control telephones begin receiving fire control data from the fire control stations.



Below, AGFA members initiate a gun drill with the public.



Gun Drill Continues.



CPL Minton prepares to fire the gun.



After completing the drill, members prepare to remove the practice projectile from the breach of Gun #1, a M1906 6-inch rifle. When you don't fire it, you need to unload it.



Throughout the day, ships constantly passed into the Battery's field of fire. Here, PVT Kaiserman paints a very intimidating and determined picture of a Coast Artillery gun-pointer sighting down on a potential enemy vessel through the M1904 30-inch telescopic sight.



Seen here is the view FROM the site – framed squarely on a tanker proceeding out-bound from New York Harbor on the Ambrose Channel, some 7 miles distant... easy pickings for the 6" M1900 rifles.



After the public portion of the event closed, the membership gathered for video and still pictures of a gun drill. Below the entire crew assembles around the gun in preparation. Despite the sunlight, the day proved to be quite chilly, and members are in a mix of wool and fatigue uniforms.



In the photo below, the gun drill is at the stage where the shell is being rammed into the forcing cone inside the powder chamber. Next will follow the powder charge.



After the round is loaded, the powder charge is introduced into the breach of the gun. The member in the left of the picture is carrying the shell tray back to its staging area to await a new shell.



When the drill is complete, the reverse order is performed beginning with extraction of the drill shell (projectile) in the photo below. This is done by taking a ramming rod with a hook on the end and engaging the ring recessed into the base of the shell, exactly as was done so long ago.



Here, SGT Bennett prepares to ram a fresh shell into the breech during the drill.



And the gun crew prepares to fire another round,



This photo, taken at the height of the drill, shows another round about to be loaded as PVT Meisleman sponges out the tube to extinguish burning powder embers from the previous shot.



SGT Bennett rams home another shell. Standing directly behind him, with the powder charge, is PVT Egan. AGFA members performed over one dozen drills to the constant chiming of the Time-Interval Bell, and were consistently executing the loading exercises within the pre-determined 15-second intervals, a fitting tribute the Coast Artillery veterans we honor at these events.



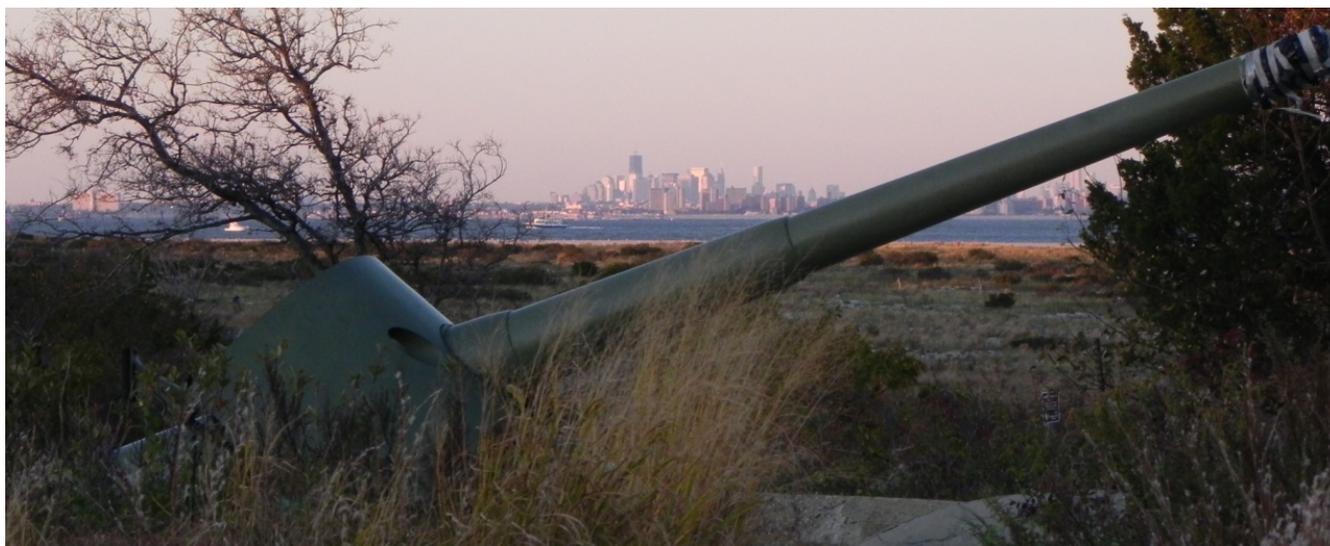
The photo below, taken late Sunday afternoon, shows the crew preparing to fire Gun #1, a 6-inch M1900 seacoast rifle, serial number 22, manufactured by Watervliet Arsenal in 1903.



Sadly, all things must come to an end for the year, and AGFA members began the bittersweet task of securing the Battery for the harsh winter that lies ahead. Here, SGT Lacy coils up the cabling for a EE-91 phone underneath the ever present barrel of the M1900 rifle as the late evening sun reflects off the gun tube.



As the sun began to set, we could see New York City lit up in the distance. Seen here, over Gun Number 2, is lower Manhattan. The dark tower rising in the center of the photo is the Freedom Tower, currently under construction.



Before Gun No, 1 was completely secured, a tanker steamed into New York Harbor via the Sandy Hook Channel, less than a half-mile off shore from the beach. She is seen here, through the gun-pointers viewing port, looking over the telescopic sight.



The tanker, the Susanna S, slowly and quietly slips by under the ever watchful muzzle of Gun 1. Although silent now, this gun, its battery, and the Fort remain on eternal watch over the harbor.



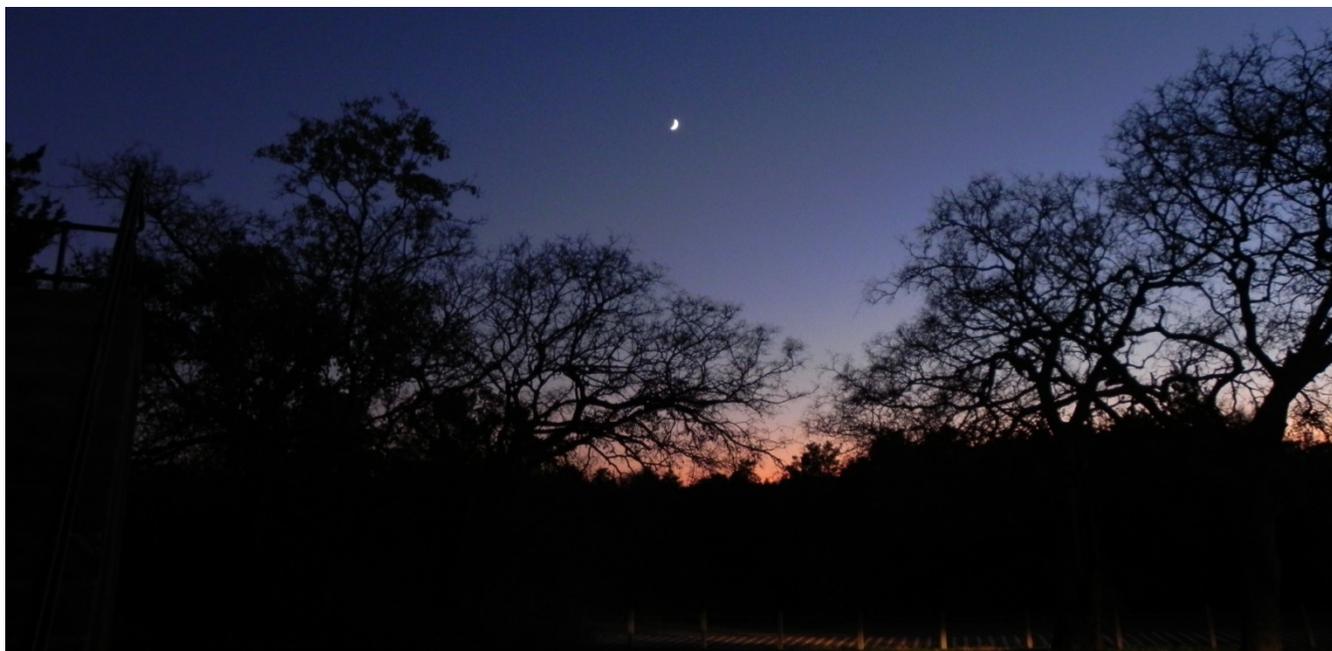
Also on eternal vigil over the harbor is the Sandy Hook Lighthouse, seen here from Battery Gunnison and illuminated in the setting sun. As the vistas around Sandy Hook and the New York Harbor skyline changed over time, this very same view of the lighthouse, which was built in 1763, has been shared by members of the Fort Hancock Garrison, AGFA members, and the public since it was modified to its current configuration in 1853.



As the sun finally sets, AGFA members do a final check of the Gun No. 1 platform and begin the final process of storing equipment and securing the gun until the spring workdays and the May Coast Defense Days event when it will be 1943 again.



A beautiful late autumn evening and a bright crescent moon capped off yet another wonderful year of preservation and living history at Fort Hancock, one of the most successful to date. We look forward to a successful and exiting year in 2012!



Two of AGFA's veteran NCO's take time for a quick, final photo with three of our newest members. AGFA had several new members join this year, and we look forward to many more in the months ahead. Have you thought about volunteering? We'd like to have you with us.



Battery Gunnison/New Peck will be closed during the winter except for special occasional tours. Association workdays at the battery that are open to the public will be listed in the Park's seasonal activities guide beginning in April. The battery will open again regularly for the public beginning on Coastal Defense Days in May 2012 and weekends during the summer of 2012. For additional information please call the Sandy Hook Visitor Center at (732) 872-5970 or consult the seasonal activity guide available at the NPS website <http://www.nps.gov/gate/planyourvisit/index.htm>.

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