

Coast Artillery Living History Fort Hancock, NJ

On 15-17 May 2015, the National Park Service (NPS) conducted the annual spring Coast Defense and Ocean Fun Day (sponsored by New Jersey Sea Grant Consortium - <http://njseagrant.org/>) in conjunction with the Army Ground Forces Association (AGFA), the Army Air Force Historic Association (<http://aafha.org/>) and other historic and scientific organizations. Coast Defense Day showcases Fort Hancock's rich military heritage thru tours and programs at various locations throughout the Sandy Hook peninsula - The Fort Hancock and Sandy Hook Proving Ground National Historic Landmark.

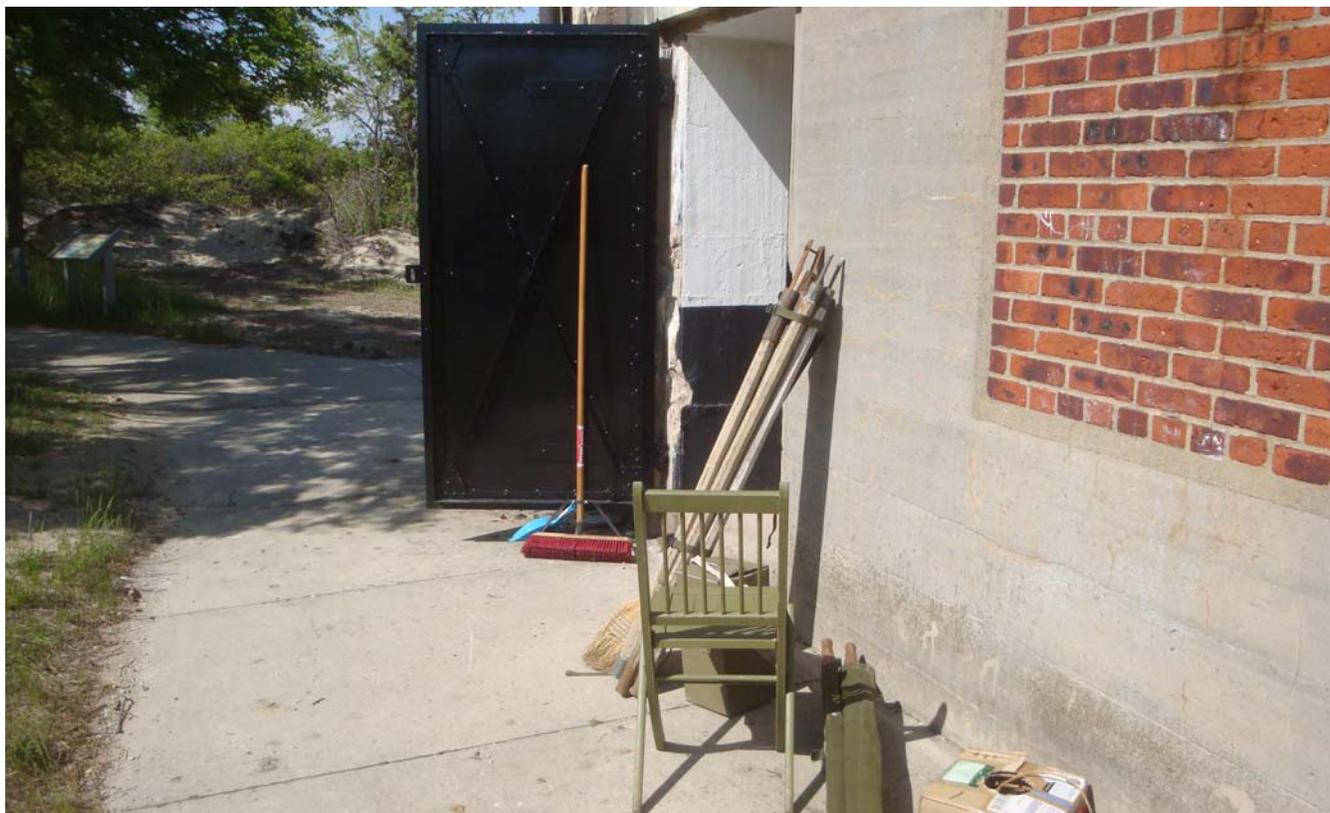
Army Ground Forces Association concentrated its efforts at Battery Gunnison/New Peck which from February to May 1943 was converted from a disappearing to a barbette carriage gun battery. The members of AGFA that participated in the event were Donna Cusano, Paul Cusano, Doug Houck, Richard King, Kathleen Kluxen, Anne Lutkenhouse, Eric Meiselman, Tom Minton, Mike Murray, Jerry Still, Paul Taylor, and Shawn Welch. AGFA guests included, Paul Casalese, Joe DiGiovanni, Iain McMullen, Chris Moore, Steve Rossi, Bill Winslow and twelve members of the Army Air Force Historical Association lead by Wayne Placek and Al Parisi and who included CPT Joe Turi, Kathleen McNalley, SGT Len Komar, MSG Alan Palm, 2LT Stephen Toth, CPT Chris Hartney, SGT Gary Carnevale and SGT Keith Marvel.

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 final activation of the two 6" rapid fire M1900 guns at New Battery Peck. The guns were moved from an adjacent Battery a mile away to this site to provide a greater field of fire in the defense of New York Harbor. 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 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 Gunnison/New Peck played as Advance HECP #1's Examination Battery.

The photo below shows the majority of the participants on Sunday 17 May in front of Gun #1 of Battery Gunnison/New Peck. This was AGFA's largest living history event to date at Fort Hancock.



Every event begins with cleaning and preparation of displays. Below, the Chemical Warfare Room gets a good sweeping on Friday prior to unpacking medical items for our Aid Station Display.



Seen below, SGT Minton is performing a function's check after assembling the traversing gear on Gun No. 1, preparing it for the weekends displays and gun drills with the public. It is a 6" M1900 seacoast rifle, made at Watervliet Arsenal in Albany, NY in 1903.



Through the past eight months, AGFA has been busy working on restoration projects for showcasing at this year's Coast Defense Days. Below is the result of a two year long project, culminating in a reproduction M1900 'firing device' for the 6-inch M1900 rifle. The silver colored device is shown below, installed on the breech, connected to the firing circuit. The original device enabled the weapon to be fired either electrically, or with a lanyard, which is seen in the photo.



Approximately two years ago, AGFA secured several light fixtures used for fire control instruments in WWII. After locating the correct reproduction electrical plugs (identical to those used on Model T Fords), we fabricated the lights that would have been used on the gun carriage in nighttime or low-light conditions. One is seen here on the elevation drum of Gun No. 1.



There were several other lights that needed to be made as well. Below, the newly fabricated light for the M1904 sight cradle elevation disk is shown.



Looking from the gun pointers position, one can see the electric cable for the M1904 sight cradle light and the reticle light on the M1904 telescopic sight. The reticle is the vertical line inside the sight which is used to accurately track a target (in this case ships). This is the first time lights have been on this carriage since 1948, a remarkable milestone in the Battery's restoration.



Shown below is the light for the azimuth indicator. The indicator itself was another AGFA project that was completed approximately four years ago.



Friday was a busy day, we snuck in a quick meal in preparation for the night's Lantern Tour. In the photo below, 1LT Lutkenhouse stirs a hot stew for the membership as we prepare for the night. She is cooking the stew on a fully-operational 1940 Coleman "Speedmaster 500" stove using 1941 and 1944 Army cooking implements.



We gathered in the powder magazine at 1700 for chow, prior to moving out for the tour.



The team pauses for a picture in preparation for the lantern tour. The team includes 2LT Taylor, CPL Cusano, 2LT Cusano, 1LT Lutkenhouse, LTC Welch, LT(jg) Casalese (USCGR), MAJ Winslow, 1st SGT Murray and SGT Minton.



As we moved towards the start point of the tour, 1st Sgt Murray discovered a number of 12-inch shells, placed near the light house by the NPS. These shells were fired in the long distant past as evidenced by the rifling engraving, or "cuts," on their rotating bands.



Upon arrival at Bldg 28, the post Guardhouse and former Fort Hancock Museum, we discovered a Boy Scout troop waiting for us next to the four Army artillery shells on display there - two early 16-inch and two 12-inch projectiles. The tour started with one Boy Scout troop and about 10 other visitors for about 35 people total.



The tour soon left Bldg 28 and moved through the historic post of Fort Hancock. Below SGT Minton and 2LT Cusano discuss various aspects of the time period with the tour participants. The Scouts at center are looking at one of many historic interpretive panels placed around the historic main post area.



Inside the mortar battery defensive wall, the tour stopped to learn about the Harbor Defense Command Post (HDCP) from AGFA members as 1st SGT Murray stands with the visitors..



The Lantern Tour is always one of the most popular events at Fort Hancock. As we left the HDCP we picked up another 40 people, which included two more Boy Scout Troops. They were quickly added into the existing group. SGT Minton, below, looks back on the growing crowd.



The tour arrived at Battery Gunnison/New Peck as dusk approached. The large 70-odd person group was segregated into four 15-person teams and sent to the various parts of the battery on a 10 minute rotating basis.



The first group is inside the Chemical Warfare room which contained the medical exhibits. 1LT Lutkenhouse speaks with one of the Boy Scout leaders about medical issues that were unique to the Coast Artillery.



Another group entered the magazine and is seen here at the end of the shell room preparing to view the functional shell hoist for Gun #2. There are approximately 170 6-inch projectiles in the magazine. The stack of yellow shells weighs about 8 tons.



As the tour passed through the powder room, the visitors stopped and took photographs of the powder cans. There are approximately 300 of these World War Two period 6-inch powder cans within the magazine. Each of the stacks holds about 30 cans.



Gun #1 platform was a busy place as well. The photo below provides a good view of the restored gun platform lights - likely the only functional ones of their kind left in the USA. At one time there were at least seventy of these at Fort Hancock and hundreds across the county.



The machine shop garnered special attention from the curious Boy Scouts. Below T5 King provides answers to their many questions about the WWII-era equipment utilized there.



Back in the magazine, 1st Sgt Murray provides an overview of how the shell-hoist for Gun #2 works. It is a “Hodges-Type,” hand-cranked, gear-driven chain hoist, restored to operational status by AGFA members in 2004. It is one of only a handful of surviving shot hoists in the USA, and one of less than a half-dozen that still function.



As 1st Sgt Murray demonstrates the shell hoist, CPL Cusano looks on prepared to answer additional questions.



Even with groups of 15, the crowds were large. Below our guest MAJ Bill Winslow prepares to help shepherd the group in the machine shop to the magazine, and get a new group into T-5 King.



The group that left the machine shop now enters the magazine. The telephone booth door is open to the right and the light inside the booth is plainly visible.



In the medical room a group is inside with 1LT Lutkenhouse and 2LT Cusano as another group of eager Scouts waits its turn at the entrance.



One of the more gratifying sights for the AGFA team was the first use of our new gun carriage fire control lights. Below the elevation disk light, the sight cradle light and the azimuth indicator lights are all very visible.



In the photo below, 1st SGT Murray traverses the gun. The carriage fire control lights cast a historic glow on the gun platform that hasn't been seen since the 1940's. In the background the lights of New York City are visible, as is the elevated gun tube for Gun #2.



The night gun drills are what our visitors really enjoy. Below on the left SGT Minton stands by the gun pointer position. In the photo on the right 1st Sgt Murray and LTC Welch stand by on the sponge and rammer.



Visitors always get to help out as part of the gun crew. Two young men prepare to place the powder bag in the gun as 2LT Taylor and T5 King look on.



Inside the machine shop T5 King and MAJ Winslow go over milling and machining techniques and actually use the machine to cut a small plastic top-hat for a visitor.



Meanwhile, in the plotting room, 2LT Taylor goes over the operations of the plotting board with visiting Boy Scouts who are learning how to track ships on the board. This part of the Battery is always a unique one for visitors, as they learn about accurate trigonometry and ballistics in the pre-computer era.



After a successful tour, AGFA's members are seen here back in the barracks (Bldg 41) preparing to bed down to get underway for Saturday morning. The event "Field Order" is taped to the wall behind the team for ready review of the schedule of events.



On Saturday, lunch was prepared in the morning and consisted of a variety of sandwiches. Below 1st Sgt Murray and MAJ Winslow prepare the sandwiches. In AGFA, everyone pitches in. We use wax paper to wrap our sandwiches, in a nod to 1940s practice.



Meal prep also means doing the dishes. Below CPL Cusano and SSG Houck finish up the breakfast dishes - WWII-era US Army plates, cups and flatware - before the team takes off to Battery Gunnison/New Peck.



The highlight of Saturday was visiting Battery Lewis and its new 16-inch gun tube located at Monmouth County's Hartshorne Woods Park (<http://www.monmouthcountyparks.com/Page.aspx?ID=2524>). We are joined in the photo below by WWII Veterans LT(jg) Bob Krause (USN) and Francis Hayes (USA), both standing on the right hand side of the picture. Bob trained men to fly catapult seaplanes that flew from cruisers and battleships. Francis was a combat infantry soldier who fought in, and was captured during the Battle of Bulge in December 1944. Both gentlemen have been strong supporters and mentors of our team.



The immense size of the Mk-VII 16-inch 50 caliber gun tube is apparent in the photograph below. It is 68 feet long and weighs over 240,000 pounds.



A further demonstration of the size of the gun is the emplacement for the carriage shown below. The entire gun and carriage unit weighed over 1 million pounds. AGFA members and the public alike are eagerly anticipating the restoration of the Battery to its own WWII configuration.



After visiting Battery Lewis, the team worked at Battery Gunnison. Several projects were executed and completed throughout the afternoon.



Pictured below is CPL Meiselman and CPT MacMullen as they arrive for dinner. Per Army custom, they chose to enjoy the meal in dress uniform attire, as opposed to fatigues.



Saturday evening was full of rest and relaxation for AGFA. 1LT Lutkenhouse is seen here with the "Oozlefinch", the legendary mascot of the Coast Artillery, as our guest CPT MacMullen eats his dinner in his Class A dress uniform, also known as the "Pinks and Greens".



After dinner, the team enjoyed cheese, crackers and good conversation as LT(jg) Bob Krause discussed his participation in the 70th Anniversary of VE Day in Washington, D.C. the week earlier on Friday May 8th.



Sunday Morning started quickly - below the team finishes breakfast prior to moving to Battery Gunnison.



We arrived at Battery Gunnison/New Peck at 0900 and quickly began to prepare to open at 1100 hours. Below CPL MacMullen carries M1903 Springfield rifles, gas masks and cartridge belts to the gun platform.



It took about 90 minutes to get everyone set up. Below, COL Placek (AAFHA) stands next to LT(jg) Krause and his assembled display honoring his brother's service - and sacrifice - as a US Navy Corsair pilot in WWII. This year marked the 70th anniversary of his brother's loss on April 18th, 1945.



Prior to the 1100 start, members of AAFHA toured Battery Gunnison/New Peck. Our Army Air Forces compatriots, many of whom had never been to Fort Hancock, were very interested. Below COL Placek, MAJ Parisi and WRAF Kathleen McNally inspect the shell hoist. Kathleen McNally, a veteran of the Women's Royal Air Force Auxiliary, served her native England during WWII.



As soon as the day opened at 1100, we were busy. The AAFHA displays, set up adjacent to Battery Gunnison, saw heavy traffic throughout the day.



Below, Capt. Chris Hartney of AAFHA explains the Army Air Force presence in Atlantic City during WWII to NPS Park Ranger Jen Cox. She was the primary coordinator for the AGFA/AAFHA participation in Coast Defense Days.



Below, members of AAFHA pose outside of their exhibit space, located in the Gunnison Beach Visitor's Plaza, next to Battery Gunnison..



One of the specialties of AAFHA is collecting and transcribing oral histories from Army Air Force veterans. The books of oral histories are to the left below next to SGT. Gary Carnevale and Kathleen McNalley - a veteran of the Royal Air Force Women's Auxiliary during WWII.



As AAFHA set up, the team on the Gun Platform prepared for the day. Below 1st SGT Murray and 2LT Still review gun procedures.



On the gun platform CPL Cusano, CPL MacMullen, and Corporal Meiselman ground their equipment and weapons into the rifle racks to prepare for gun drills - it was going to be a long day.



2LT Still and CPL Meiselman start a gun drill. The reproduction M1900 firing device is visible on the end of the breach block.



The gun platform team conducts a gun drill. SGT Minton is "priming" the firing device as 2LT Still, CPL Meiselman, 1st SGT Murray and CPL Cusano observe.



The gun crew is preparing for another gun drill as members of the public observe. Soon, they will be asked to participate themselves.



During a short break in gun drills, 2LT Still and 1st SGT Murray briefly converse on Army matters.



And then it is back to gun drills as the public lines the rails of the gun platform. The gun platform is always the most popular spot during the day.



Another view of the gun platform looking up the stairs at 1st SGT Murray holding the rammer staff, as we prepared to run another drill for a new set of visitors.



In this photo 2LT Still and 1st Sgt Murray speak to visitors about the M1900 6-inch gun. After the drills were completed, visitors were allowed to get a closer look at the gun.



In the drill below, 1st SGT Murray rams a shell as CPL Meiselman prepares to close the breach of the gun. Notice that all the soldiers are wearing their gas masks to protect against chemical attack - a very real threat in 1943.



Below a young lady learns how “strong” she is as she moves 47,000 pounds of steel using the traversing hand wheel. The gun traverses as easily now as the day it was made, over 112 years ago.



Another gun drill is conducted for our latest round of visitors - the traffic flow was constant throughout the afternoon.



Two young "Cosmoliners," a term for Coast Artillery soldiers, experience traversing the gun for themselves.



SGT Minton speaks to a visitor. In the background is all the field equipment of the gun platform crew as well as their M1903 Springfield rifles. Coast Artillery troops often used rifle racks at their duty stations as the work was very physical and hands on. However, the soldiers were required to react within seconds to any threat of direct enemy soldier attack.



Below, SGT Minton tracks a ship using the M1904 telescopic sight. Another project of AGFA for this past 8 months was the return of reticles to the two M1904 telescopic sights that AGFA owns. It took us about five months to determine the best method to reproduce the reticles, and it paid off for this event.



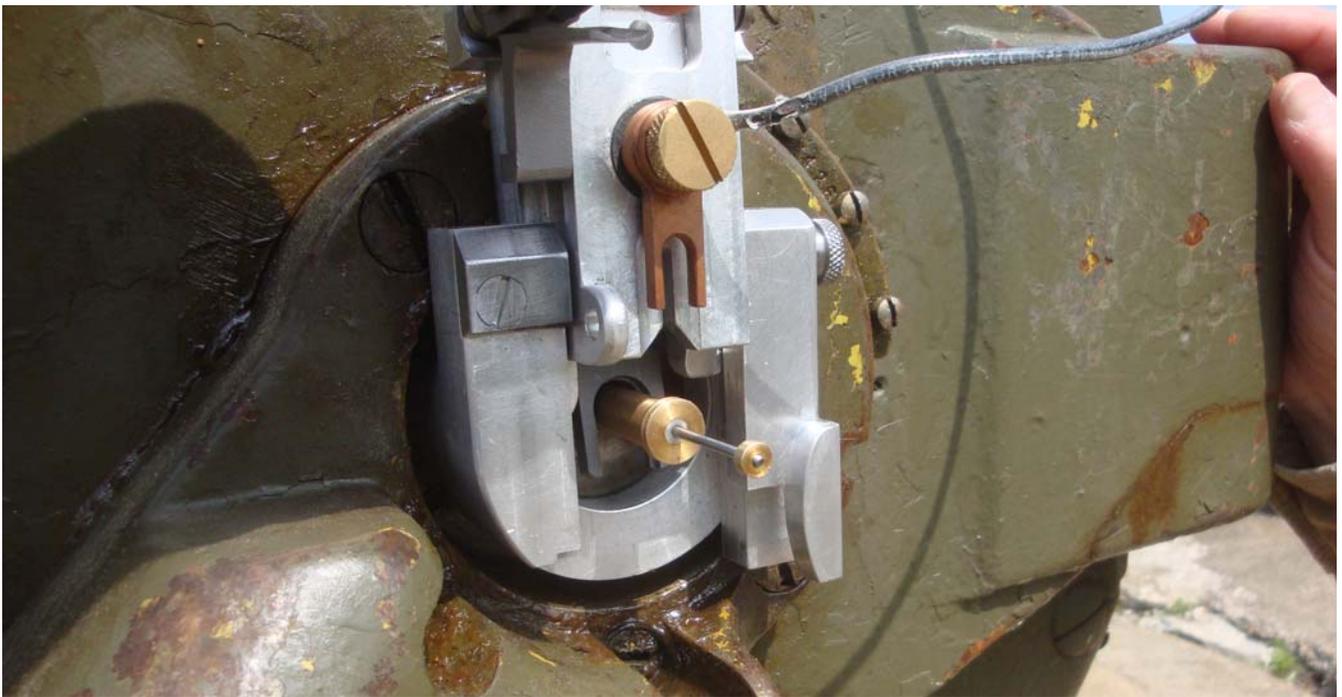
The new reticle is plainly visible below. Finding the right size wire was tough and we obtained the thinnest wire available. Additionally one notices the haziness of the day - visibility was actually fairly poor.



Another view of the newly reproduced M1900 firing device with a primer inserted. It worked like a charm, and was of great interest to the public.



The device below is shown 'open,' with the "primer" partially extracted. These are specially produced primers designed to complete an electric circuit. Once we have perfected the reliability of these primers to complete an electric circuit, we will use them to complete a circuit for an audible "boom". Next step, figuring out the best way to produce that "boom". Any ideas?



While visitors were on the gun platform, plotting room, machine shop and medical stations, we also had tours of the magazine. Below visitors look at the various charts on the wall that explain the many different types of artillery shells fielded by the Coast Artillery.



Also in the magazine were the sandwiches for the team. CPLs Meiselman and MacMullen prepare to quickly enjoy a sandwich taken from a 1940 marmite container.



The plotting room was also a busy place - MAJ Winslow talks with visitors about the BD-95 switchboard that controls the battery's telephones.



Below 2LT Taylor provides an overview to an Army Field Artillery soldier of the differences between field and coast artillery fire control techniques- which are almost night and day from one another.



Medical interpretation was also very busy - below 1LT Lutkenhouse assists a member of the public in 'trying out' a medic's M1 steel helmet.



With helmet, medic yoke, medic bags and web gear, our visitor is ready to 'treat' wounded coast artillery soldiers!



In addition to the field gear of a combat medic, 1LT Lutkenhouse speaks with a Boy Scout leader about how versatile safety pins were during WWII. Behind the Boy Scout leader is AGFA's 1943 Picker Field X-Ray machine.



In the plotting room LTC Welch shows a visitor the restored 1915 period electric panel box that controls all the electric lights and receptacles within Battery Gunnison/New Peck.



The inside of the panel box is shown below. Notice all the fuses are in place - however, they are only carrying 12 volts of DC power. The knife switches of the panel box actually control 12 volt DC relay switches that actually act as the switches for the 110 volt AC current. This keeps the almost 100 year old box operating within current electric safety code.



In the photo below MAJ Winslow sits next to the plotting board preparing for the next wave of visitors.



In the machine shop, T5 King reviews the capabilities of the lath with a visitor.



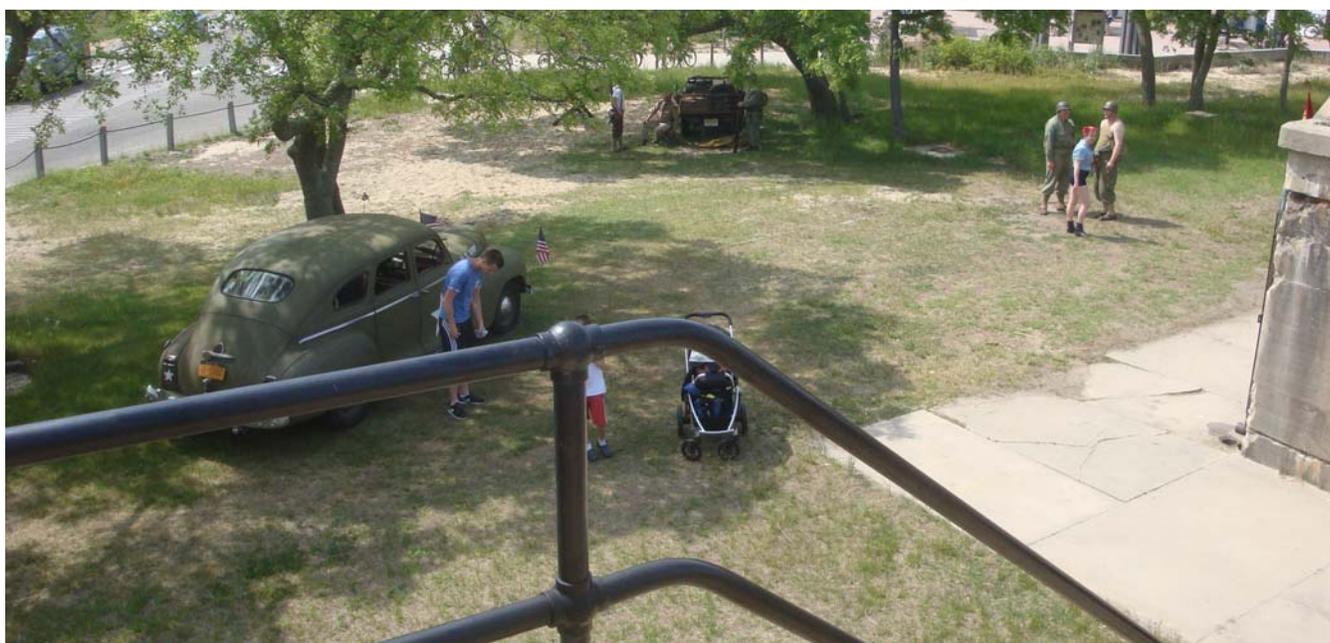
In addition to the Battery Gunnison/New Peck stations, SSG Steve Rossi brought his WWII period jeep and displays to the Battery parade. Below visitors from Staten Island ask questions about the equipment and the jeep.



In addition to the SSG Steve Rossi's jeep, Chris Moore brought his WWII era Plymouth staff car.



Both the staff car and the jeep were parked on the Battery Gunnison Parade and saw extensive visitation. The vehicles added a nice historic touch to the other displays.



Below to the left Chris Moore and SSG Steve Rossi observe their displays as visitors talk with 2LT Cusano and CPT Turi.



Below SSG Moore and “Brigadier General Philip Gage”, AKA BG Joe DiGiovanni speak with visitors. BG Gage was the Commander of the Harbor Defenses of New York from 1941 to 1944. Joe has studied BG Gage and can relate his significant accomplishments as the Commander.



Chris Moore's staff car is a very detailed restoration, complete with 48 star flags and a Four-Star General's ID plate.



At the end of the day LT(jg) Casalese and 1LT Lutkenhouse take a quick break before the bittersweet task packing up after the event and heading home.



Throughout the summer of 2015, AGFA members and US National Park Rangers will be offering guided tours of Battery Gunnison/ New Peck at times specified on the NPS website (<http://www.nps.gov/gate/planyourvisit/index.htm>). For additional information call the Sandy Hook Unit, Fort Hancock and Sandy Hook Proving Ground National Landmark Visitor Center at (732) 872-5970.

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