

Coast Artillery Living History
Reading Army Air Field, Reading, PA
(Mid-Atlantic Air Museum's WWII Weekend)

On 3-5 June 2011, Fort Mott State Park, supported by the Army Ground Forces Association, attended the 21st Annual Mid-Atlantic Air Museum's World War Two Weekend in Reading, Pennsylvania.

The members of AGFA that participated in the event were Mike Bonicorsi, Andy Grant, Bob Grant, Doug Houck, Anne Lutkenhouse, Eric Meiselman, Tom Minton, Mike Murray, Joe Rosamilia, Gerry Still, Paul Taylor, Stephen Turner, Vincent Turner, Vince Turner Jr., Gary Weaver, Shawn Welch and Kyle Schafer. Guests included Chris Zeeman of the Coastal Defense Study Group, an organization dedicated to preserving coastal defense locations and equipment world-wide, Mr. Chris Simich, who traveled from Fort MacArthur in San Pedro CA, and Ms. Kathleen Kluxen and Ms. Deana Schaefer who volunteer at both Forts Mott and Hancock in NJ.

The educational objective was to provide interpretation of the US Army's Coast Artillery mission during the summer of 1941, several months prior to the United States' official entry into World War Two that following December. Fort Mott State Park's original 1942 Sperry 60-inch, 800,000,000 candle power search light was the center piece of the organizational display and operated on Friday and Saturday nights during the hanger dances.

The photo below shows a majority of the participating membership on Saturday 4 June in front of the bivouac site display sign. The crest on the sign is the distinctive unit insignia of the 21st Coast Artillery Regiment (Harbor Defense), which garrisoned the Harbor Defenses of the Delaware River, which included Fort Mott at Finn's Point on the outskirts of Pennsville, New Jersey.



Set up for this event is a large-scale project. This photo of the encampment under construction was taken at 8:42 PM, as daylight was waning. It continued until after dark.



Here, part of the encampment is lit by lantern light after completion.



Finishing touches were added on Friday morning. Here, LTC Welch and SSG Houck assemble and connect EE-91 telephones and patch them into the communications net.



Another view of the bivouac site shows the primary display tent setup with member SSG Doug Houck to the right.



The photo below shows the inside of the display tent showcasing an aircraft plotting board and communications setups to include four EE-91 coast artillery telephones, a EE-8 field telephone and a BD-72 12 line field switchboard. An aircraft recognition board is in front of the plotting board. AGFA members made a unique shift in their normal interpretation this year, offering a focus on the Coast Artillery's anti-aircraft mission rather than on harbor defense, or anti-shipping operations. Can YOU identify that aircraft?



The back of the display tent is shown below.



Below, members take a rest on original WWII field chairs as they prepare for additional visitors.



AGFA is very fortunate to encamp each year upon what can easily be referred to prime “real estate.” The main taxi way for ALL planes at the air show is directly behind us. AGFA members get the fortunate experience of having the most famous aircraft in the world rumble by almost at arm’s length on a constant basis throughout the weekend. Here, the beautifully restored Boeing B-17 G “Yankee Lady,” a WWII Weekend favorite, rolls by on her way to take off.



In the photo below, 2LT Taylor and CPL Turner ride in the 1944 Ford jeep on loan to Ft. Mott from AGFA member CPT Jon Prostak.



The Friday and Saturday evening meals were catered by the Mid-Atlantic Air Museum. In the photo below, the membership gathers at the mess tent to eat the Friday evening meal and talk.



After dinner, AGFA members took a true-period correct approach to relaxing, GI Style. A phonograph was produced, and original recordings from vintage 78 RPM records echoed out over the air field from the AGFA encampment.



After a long day, the sun finally began to set. The massive tail on the left belongs to the Boeing B-29 Super Fortress, "FIFi." A North American B-25 Mitchell, named "Yankee Warrior," is on the right. Only at Reading do you get such a beautiful site as this.



As at any encampment, field hygiene, while austere at best, is critically important in keeping the troops clean and healthy. AGFA members always wash and scrub up before breakfast each day. Here, PVT Simich uses a side-mirror "borrowed" from an Army truck to shave.



Saturday morning the membership gathered for breakfast. Below, members got a good meal and many returned to get seconds in the chow line. PVT Meiselman center, makes a quick run through the line before preparing to greet visitors.



The backbone of the mess operations were SSG Bob Grant and CPL Vince Turner (in red apron). They kept AGFA members fed, and most importantly, hydrated, throughout the entire event



During the day, the Search Light and its generator trailer were prime attractions. In the photo below, the membership prepares to move the searchlight to a better location position so the public could get a more detailed look at it.



Below, 1st SGT Murray and LTC Welch stand outside the “air warning station”. This observation station was usually the first line of defense against an air attack, providing the “eyes on the ground.” There are aircraft silhouette charts inside the station, so the observers can quickly distinguish between friend or foe.



Inside the station, CPL Turner scans the skies for enemy aircraft.



Amongst the more unique vehicles at this year's display was this US Army Signal Corps messenger pigeon trailer – with live pigeons! Despite all the modern radio communications equipment that had been developed by the 1940's, getting a message quickly from one end of the battlefield to the other often sometimes needed to be sent "air mail" and rode on the leg of a pigeon.



A major hit of the event is the Flea Market. Below, SSG Weaver exchanges his high top boots for a new pair of GI-Issue ankle boots freshly purchased at the flea market. In the meantime, the hot weather was a constant menace. 2LT Lutkenhouse and PVT Meiselman discuss the effects of the heat and how to guard against its effects.



Another view of the display tent is below.



Light moments are always appreciated. CPT Grant, SSG Houck, PVT Simich, SGT Turner, PVT Bonacorsi, and 1st Sgt Murray enjoy a laugh during a lull in the day's activity.



The heat of the afternoon on the airfield can be oppressive. Below PVT Simich and PVT Bonacorsi, 2LT Lutkenhouse and Miss Kluxen escape the sun's rays.



The Friday evening highlight was the operation of the 60-inch, 800 million candle power searchlight.



Below CPL Turner operates the generator.



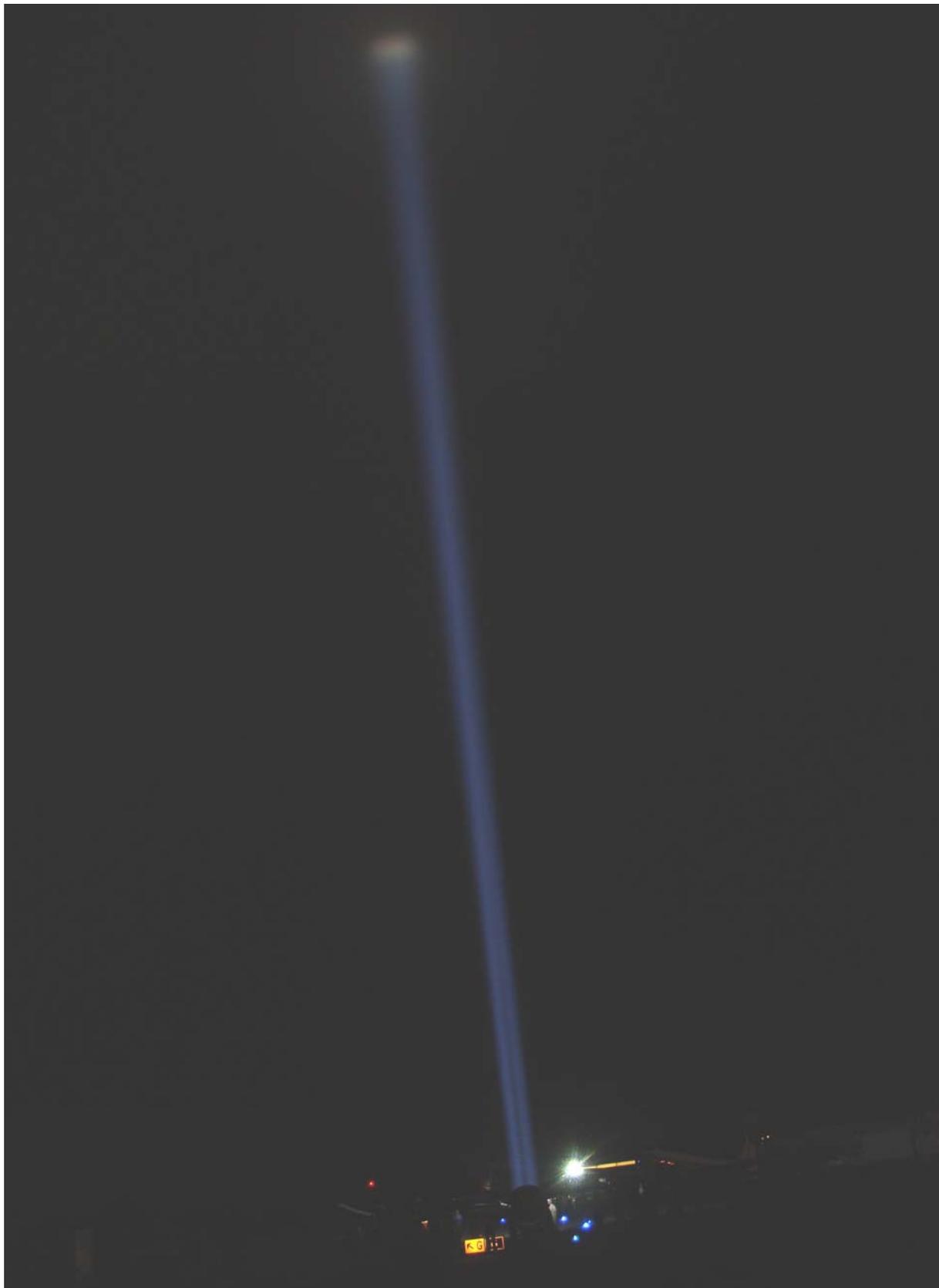
The power of the searchlight is apparent in the photo below.



If you look closely in the photo below, the burning carbon arc can be seen.



In the photo below, the searchlight beam is hitting the low cloud cover.



While the searchlight operates, many attendees at Reading enjoy dancing to the live swing band.



As the dance went on, a beautiful crescent moon rose. It is seen here, over the B-29 Superfortress, and a Curtiss SN2C "Helldiver," a multi-role US naval bomber, which is the last flying example of this aircraft in the world.



As the evening wound down, 1st Sgt Murray and other members prepare for a good nights sleep.



And the next day, everyone got up bright and early.



As always, there were many classic aircraft to see at the show. Below is one of the last air-worthy Grumman F4F Wildcat fighters.



1st Sgt Murray stands next to the nose of the Wildcat. This tubby little aircraft was the main US Naval carrier fighter in the early part of WWII, and held the line against more maneuverable Japanese planes.



Another very rare aircraft at the show is one of the last flying Douglas SBD Dauntless dive bombers. The Dauntless fixed its place in history, in June of 1942 at the Battle of Midway, as it was the SBDs that saved the day and sank five Japanese aircraft carriers. This act changed the course of WWII in the Pacific decidedly in the Allies favor.



Here, the Dauntless flies overhead against a hazy gray sky on Sunday.



And here, two Mustangs roar overhead during the air show.



This year's event presented a most remarkable experience. The last flying Boeing B-29 Super Fortress in the world came to the air show, and she was a complete showstopper. The B-29 is remembered in history as the aircraft that dropped two atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, bringing the Pacific campaign, and WWII, to a swift end in August of 1945.



Seen here, at the end of the runway, this monster of an aircraft prepares to “run up” her engines for take off.



Fifi lifts off the ground after rumbling down the runway. The sound from her four engines was deafening. This was a first-time experience for thousands of participants and visitors alike.



The photo below shows the B-29 flying over our bivouac site. The Super Fort is a massive plane, especially when compared on the ground parked to other bombers and fighters.



Other rare aircraft at this event included the last airworthy Curtiss C-46 "Commando," in the United States which made a name for itself flying supplies over the Himalaya mountains from India to China.



Another returning veteran of the Airshow is the C-54, another heavy-hauling cargo plane. This particular craft is part of a living memorial to those who participated in the "Berlin Airlift" in 1948.



2011 also marked the 100th Anniversary of US Naval Aviation. Although not a WWII aircraft by any means, this rare Curtiss Pusher, in US Navy markings, symbolically flew to commemorate the centennial during the air show.



It is seen here, being brought by hand back to her spot on the apron after landing. You just never know what you're going to see at this airshow!



There were many excellent vintage military vehicles on display. Below is an M3 White halftrack.



A different half track from the one above is pictured below. There were at least four different half tracks at the event.



A “home built” German Sturmgeschütz III and a German 37mm anti-tank gun are pictured below. The term “home-built” reflects the fact that many German and Axis vehicles failed to survive WWII. In lieu of this shortage, to provide accurate armor displays at air shows and reenactments, many reenactors have purchased post-war tanks and other armored vehicles, cut them down to the chassis, and have custom built their own tanks and self propelled guns.



Another German vehicle, the Kublewagon, is pictured below. This little vehicle was the German equivalent to the Willy's Jeep, and served in every theater German troops were deployed in. It resurfaced, for the most part, as the VW “Thing” in the 1970's.



A rare vehicle, the M8 armored car with 37mm gun is pictured below.



Below is one of the many, many Jeeps that were at the event.



The photo below shows the membership enjoying breakfast on Sunday morning. The Uniform of the Day was 1st Pattern Herringbone Twill (HBT) or HBT coveralls.



Below is another view of the mess line.



Sunday also has several period correct religious services. The church service below, on a jeep hood directly next to AGFA's encampment, was well attended by event participants. The Chaplain, Padre Steve, is a regular fixture at these events, and portrays a Chaplain assigned to the 101st Airborne Division.



Below is another view of the Church Service - standing room only.



The photo below shows the Association members who attended the event on Saturday.



Right after the photo the membership began to prepare for public visitors.



Below SGT Turner walks towards the generator to greet visitors.



Below PVT Meiselman, CPT Grant, 2LT Taylor and 1st Sgt Murray confer by the searchlight.



As the event wound down, the membership undertook the task of breaking down the bivouac site, always a bittersweet moment.



While the membership prepared equipment for movement back to Fort Mott, 2LT Lutkenhouse prepared for her flight on the B-29. Flights on one of the rarest aircraft in the world could be had for a significant donation to help keep the craft airworthy, and to help defer /cover the costs of aviation fuel.



As the membership finished packing the bivouac site for movement back to Ft. Mott, the B-29 landed from its last local flight, before taxiing directly past AGFA's location. Members quickly ran over to the plane to look it over and to hear the firsthand account of 2LT Lutkenhouse's flight on "Fifi". As the crowd was gone, and the airfield was almost empty, AGFA members quickly assembled for a once-in-a-lifetime group photo underneath the nose of the B-29..



This marked the end of yet another successful Ft. Mott and Army Ground Forces Association event at Reading. AGFA members and Fort Mott staff eagerly anticipate attending the Airshow again in June 1-3 2012. If you'd like to join us as well as the 1,000 other participants to see this unique look at World War II, please visit the Mid-Atlantic Air Museum's website at: <http://www.maam.org/maamwwii.html> . We hope to see you there!

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