

Coast Artillery Living History Ft. Hancock, NJ

On 26-28 October 2012, 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. It was named in honor of Major General Winfield Scott Hancock, a Union hero of the American Civil War.

The event was a special one for the NPS. Fort Hancock at Sandy Hook is part of Gateway National Recreation Area, which was founded on October 27, 1972. This being the 40th Anniversary of the founding of Gateway, the NPS used the Fort Hancock event as a special kick-off to a full year's worth of special programming around Gateway, which includes park units in Staten Island and Brooklyn, NY. Many other additional living history groups were to participate in this specific event, ranging from the Revolutionary War to World War Two.

Unfortunately this event was truncated by the pending arrival of Hurricane Sandy. The Sunday portion of the weekend event was cancelled as Governor Chris Christie ordered the Jersey Shore evacuated by 1600 hours on Sunday (4PM). This terminated the weekend's events one day early.

The AGFA members that participated in the event were Ron Brodzinski, Donna Cusano, Paul Cusano, Chris Egan, Doug Houck, Max Kaiserman, Henry Komorowski, Kathleen Kluxen, Anne Lutkenhouse, Eric Meiselman, Tom Minton, Mike Murray, Luis Ramos, Kyle Schafer, Paul Taylor, Deanna Weaver, Gary Weaver, Shawn Welch and our guests Anthony Valenti, Phil Hillman, Meg Pigg, and Jesse and Chris Campana. 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 the proper protocols as they entered the harbor, on orders from the Harbor Entrance Control Post (HECP). This high tension action was portrayed for the public during realistic gun drills on Friday evening's Harbor Defense Lantern Tour and on Saturday until Hurricane Sandy's impending landfall caused significant adjustment to Sunday's plans. 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 photo below shows the participating members on Friday 26 October in front of Battery Gunnison/New Peck's plotting room and Battery Commander's Station just before starting the Harbor Defense Lantern Tour.



Members Tom Minton, Chris Egan and others worked over 170 hours in the week prior to the event to clean and paint the interior of the battery. The photo below shows the deterioration of the paint inside the Chemical Warfare room – specifically the peeling of the black “boot” for the lower 3 feet of the wall and the stains and peeling on the white walls.



The photo below shows the results of running a paint knife across the wall...the paint just flaked off.



Available members quickly got to work and the results are shown in the next series of pictures. Below, the new boot is shown along with 2LT Lutkenhouse's medical displays.



In addition to the work just preceding the event, over the summer the major project of the association was completing the interior lighting restoration back to the 1910's vintage configuration with restored U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (COE) 1915 standard fixtures. Below, the results of this work inside the shell magazine on the Gun #2 side are shown. Additionally, an original fixture was modified to contain a modern receptacle on its own circuit to run dehumidification apparatus and power tools. This view was taken on Friday after the interior of the battery was cleaned and prepared for the weekend's public events. It took about four hours to remove all the leaves and sweep out the sand which builds up between work weekends and events.



The view below shows the completed lighting inside the powder passage. Only a few cable hangers remain to be restored and installed. This is the lighting installation much as it looked from the late 1910s to the 1940s. The large racks on the right side of the wall are for gun implements such as ram-rods and cleaning staffs.



The powder magazine shows its four newly-restored and installed lights for the Gun #2 side. Although additional cable hangers are needed to complete the restoration, both the powder and shell magazines have been completely reconfigured with original fixtures. The large green canisters are the 1940s-vintage powder cans.



The most difficult fixtures to obtain are the COE wall lights, such as the one shown below in the chemical warfare room's air lock and decontamination chamber. The original lights in the magazine were wall mounted. The Association has only been able to obtain approximately 6 wall lights, 4 of which are in the magazine. The remaining 11 lights in the magazine are ceiling lights. We will replace these with wall lights as we locate and restore them, and then use the ceiling lights in additional restoration projects around Ft. Hancock. Notice the freshness of the white and black paint on the walls – all the result of the hard work of SGT Minton and PVT Egan.



After the cleanup, the displays began to be installed for the weekend. Below, 2LT Lutkenhouse is shown just after completing setup of her medical display in the Chemical Warfare Room. The two new wall lights are seen on the wall to her right over the cot and inside the air lock to her left. Notice as well the completely repainted black boot on the wall – again thanks to the over 170 hours of work by SGT Minton and PVT Egan in the days leading up to the event.



Much of 2LT Lutkenhouse's display is WWII vintage new-old stock medical equipment as seen below. This is the material that would have been used to treat injured soldiers during WWII. Also notice the new black wall boot.



Once the interior of the battery was cleaned and prepared for the public, the members began to gather for the Friday evening lantern tour. Below, 2LT Taylor reviews the Field Order for the evening's activities with the men as 1st Sgt Murray walks up. Coleman lanterns are at the ready, in the center of the photo.



At approximately 1800, the "escort team" for the lantern tour, led by SGT Minton, moves down the Multi-Use Path towards the Post Guard House to meet public visitors for the tour.



SGT Minton and 1st Sgt Murray, the two senior NCO's on the tour, confer while other members of AGFA light their lanterns as the public began to arrive.



T-5 Valenti, PVT Egan, RCT Shafer, Miss Kluxen, Miss Pigg and T-5 Hillman stand by as the public arrives. These ladies of the association are attired in 1940's period casual and work dress. The lanterns are 1930's and 1940's vintage Coleman Lanterns, some of which were US Army issue.



Below SGT Minton, LTC Welch and 1st Sgt Murray prepare to hand out tour guides to the public. These documents present an overview of events – both home and abroad – for the October 1943 time period.



The tour group moved from the Guard House towards the Mortar Battery (Harbor Defense Command Post). Below, SGT Minton speaks to the public with his helmet “off” which signifies a 2012 discussion vice 1943. Other soldiers stand by and answer questions with their helmets on, signifying a 1943 conversation.



Below several soldiers follow the tour group into the main entrance of the Harbor Defense Command Post (HDCP) housed inside Battery McCook/Reynolds which was formerly a 16 gun 12-inch mortar battery, the first of its kind, built in 1895.



Below 1st Sgt Murray (with lantern in center) moves with the group from the HDCP towards Battery Gunnison/New Peck. Although the threat of hurricane Sandy kept the tour group smaller than usual, some 75 participants came out to join us for the evening.



The tour group was large enough (over 50 people) to be broken into four groups which simultaneously toured either the medical station, plotting room, magazines or gun platform. Below, T-5 Komorowski explains his M1903 Springfield Rifle in the Plotting Room as 2LT Taylor observes.



Though a tight fit, 2LT Lutkenhouse explains medical procedures and materials to a large group of Girl Scouts.



Since this is October, and the event occurs just days before Halloween, a Jack-O-Lantern with a carving of an M1900 6-inch seacoast rifle, the armament of Battery Gunnison/New Peck, greeted the visitors during the lantern tour right outside the Plotting Room. AGFA member Miss Kluxen has begun the tradition of providing a custom designed, hand-carved 'Battery Pumpkin' for the October events.



Below, PVT Egan takes a group through the Powder Magazine room. The shelf on the wall behind him holds powder testing materials that were used to monitor the air quality and humidity in the magazine, as well as the condition of the gun powder in storage.



On the Gun #1 platform, loading drills were conducted with the public. Below, SSG Weaver and 1st Sgt Murray stand by as SGT Minton gives a brief overview of the implements and the gun to the public. This is the first time the Association has conducted gun drills during a night lantern tour.



Once SGT Minton completed his presentation, 1st Sgt Murray organized the gun crew for the drill. AGFA members performed the drills in the correct 15-second interval as well in the dark as they do in the daylight



After placing their M1903 Springfield and M1 Garand rifles in the rifle racks, the soldiers grab their loading implements. 1st Sgt Murray stands to the left with the shell rammer staff as soldiers pick up the drill projectile on its loading tray. SSG Weaver secures the breach swab and staff, and PVT Meiselman carries the powder bag.



Below PVT Meiselman inserts the powder bag into the gun's breach as the shell tray and rammer are moved from behind the gun.



After the tour group left Battery Gunnison /New Peck, they moved to the Harbor Entrance Control Post (HECP) on top of Battery Potter. Below the tour group moves towards the stairs that will take them to the top of Battery Potter and the HECP. Battery Gunnison/New Peck was assigned as the "Examination Battery" to the HECP and was on duty 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to support the HECP.



On top of Battery Potter, the tour group gathered and learned about how ship traffic was controlled when it entered the harbor. PVT Egan and 1st Sgt Murray guide the public through the use of the M1910A1 Azimuth Instrument which was the primary fire control and observation instrument for the Coast Artillery. The moon lit night provided optimal visibility of New York and the ships in the channel.



The HECF was a joint Army/Navy operation lead by the Navy. Boatswain's Mate 2nd Class Kaiserman, to the left of SGT Minton, explains the Navy's role in this joint mission. This dual interpretation was a first for AGFA, and was well received by the public.



The Harbor Defense Lantern Tour started at 1830 hours (6:30 PM) and ended at 2230 hours (10:30 PM). Below, members gather in the Plotting Room for a quick summary of events and to collect the equipment they will take back to the barracks for the night.



The following morning dawned bright and sunny. Feeding almost 20 people takes effort, and below, the breakfast spread as managed by Mrs. Weaver and SSG Weaver provides welcome sustenance to the membership. Below, 1st Murray loads his vintage 1940 Army mess plate as SSG Weaver looks on to the right.



The barracks used by the Association for the event is a 1940's Temporary Wood barracks modified by the National Park Service from an open bay configuration to individual rooms and a kitchen/eating area. The barracks has 15 rooms and can seat about 20 people snugly for meals. Below, members enjoy breakfast on Saturday morning with a mixture of period 1930's and 1940's Army field service and modern plastic cups.



Saturday was a day of work while the public visited Battery Gunnison/New Peck. Below, BM2 Kaiserman and T-5 Komorowski work on the "Target Arm Scale" for a Coast Artillery Wind Component Indicator. This rare piece of plotting room fire control equipment was obtained by member LTC Welch in the fall of 2011 and its movable parts were completely frozen, with some components also broken or missing. Through the work of member Joe Janesic, an AGFA member and VP of the Ft. MacArthur Museum in San Pedro, CA, Tom Grove of the Fort MacArthur Museum, and AGFA member T-5 Komorowski, the instrument has come back to life.



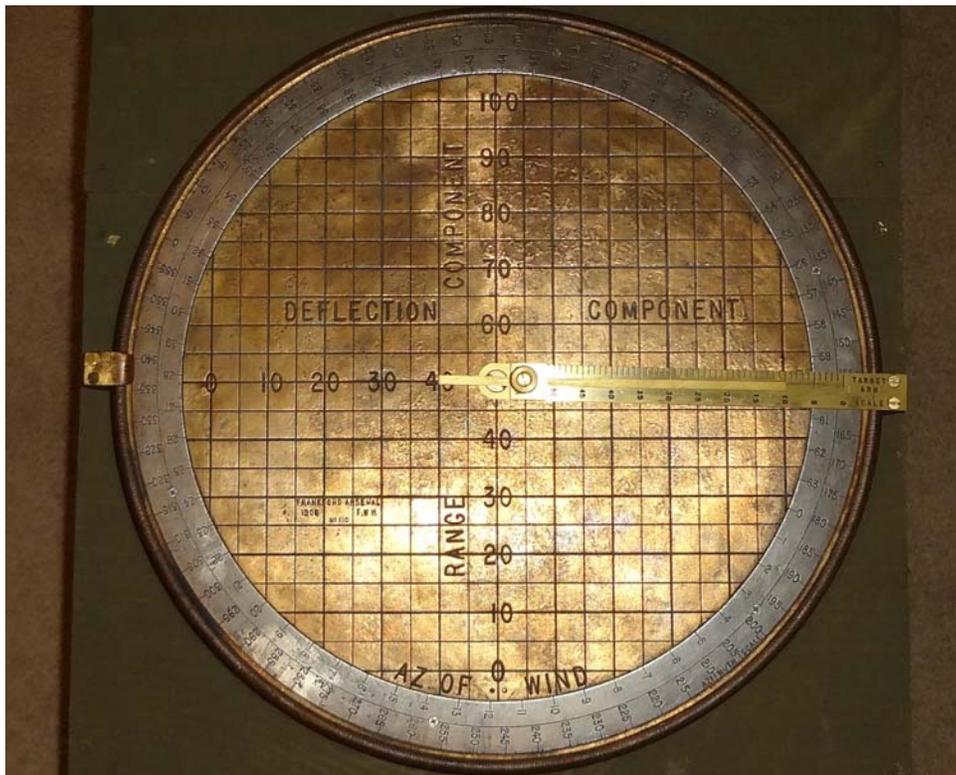
Below, T-5 Komorowski and BM2 Kaiserman use a "lettering machine" from the 1940's to mark the scale with numbers and "Target Arm Scale" as the original Arm would have looked. T-5 Komorowski used new brass bar stock to make the arm, and then the instrument below marked the arm scale proper with its measurements and lettering. The left corner of the photo shows part of the Wind Component Indicator.



Below is a closer view of the marking machine as T-5 Komorowski sets it up to mark the arm scale. The disk he is centering is the marking guide and is operated with the red handled arm in the center of the photo



The nearly completed Wind Component Indicator is shown below. All that is left to install is a pointer at the bottom (6 o'clock) and a set screw on the left to lock the target azimuth on the scale. This instrument was used to resolve the effect of wind upon the flight of a seacoast artillery projectile as it headed to its target. It provided wind adjustment information both for range (gun elevation) and direction (azimuth) to the Deflection Board and Range Percentage Corrector. This particular instrument was manufactured in 1906 at Frankford Arsenal (Philadelphia, PA) and was modified in the 1930's with a Mills and Degrees scale. Mills are a finer degree of measurement developed by the French in the late 1800's for use in field artillery. There are 6,400 mills in a circle. The Coast Artillery used degrees and hundreds and started using mills during WWI for mobile coast artillery weapons. The modification was to enable use of the instrument with both fixed and mobile coast artillery.



During the day members got a rare chance to fully demonstrate the shell hoist inside Gun #2's side of the magazine. PVT Egan operates the crank to raise the yellow High Explosive (inert) shell as SGT Minton, T-5 Valenti and BM2 Kaiserman look on.



Below, SGT Minton operates the hoist as BM2 Kaiserman moves a shell forward on the shell table to be picked up by the hoist tongs as 2LT Taylor observes from the left. Members ran five shells up the hoist, and found that there was almost no physical change in force needed for cranking the mechanism, which is quite easy to do.



At about noon on Saturday, New Jersey Governor Chris Christie announced a mandatory evacuation of the barrier islands and coast of New Jersey effective 1600 (4PM) Sunday. With this news, we began to prepare the battery for the worst. As a result of this sudden change in plans, exhibitors and living historians from other organizations - such as the interpreter with the long machete and campaign hat on the right, who represented Coast Artillery Soldiers in the Philippines-, visited the battery as everyone prepared to evacuate the fort.



Preparations inside the battery continued all afternoon. Inside the magazine, all the vintage platform lights were placed upon the shell stack and all other boxes and materials that could be damaged by a surge of water were moved at least two feet off the floor. This view is looking towards Gun #2 (north gun).



Another view of the shell room is provided below – this time looking towards Gun #1 (south gun).



The material inside the plotting room is the most vulnerable to water damage and thus all items were raised above the floor at least two feet. Below all chairs, boxes, instruments and materials are shown above floor level. All other valuable materials were removed from the battery as it was prepared to meet the onslaught of Hurricane Sandy.



Once Battery Gunnison/New Peck was secured, the membership prepared for the Annual Dinner and Business Meeting on Saturday night while we were still able to be on post. Below, 2LT Cusano and 2LT Lutkenhouse are shown in their Army Nurse Corps Class-A dress uniforms, sporting the Second Service Command patch on their left shoulders. This command supported the combat commands such as the NY/Philadelphia Sector of the Coast Artillery, which is signified by two red shells (artillery projectiles) in a diagonal field on the shoulder patch worn by the Coast Artillery soldiers.



Below, members move through the buffet line at the annual dinner as 1st Sgt Murray and 2LT Taylor await their turn. As is US Army custom, leaders (NCOs and officers) eat last.



The meal and meeting were conducted in the post (and current NPS) Fire House meeting room – a perfect venue for camaraderie and discussion. In the front of the photo below, T-5 Komorowski discusses potential projects with Pete McCarthy, the NPS Park Unit Coordinator (supervisor) for Ft. Hancock /Sandy Hook.



After the meal, the meeting was called to order and plans for the coming year were discussed. Below, 1st Sgt Murray, SSG Houck, 2LT Cusano (standing), PVT Meiselman and 2LT Taylor (seated in back) participate in the discussion.



The attendance at the meeting included a number of guests such as Pete McCarthy, NPS, and Lou Venuto, a retired NPS Interpretive Ranger who was instrumental in launching the partnership between AGFA and the NPS. The photo below shows all members and guests.



The photo below shows members and guests in period uniform. The personnel seated in the front row are in WWII period officer's uniforms. Those standing are in WWII period enlisted uniforms, as well as a 1904 Coast Artillery officer's uniform, an English Commonwealth uniform, and a U.S. Navy Seaman's uniform. In both photos, PFC Ramos holds statues of the "Oozlefinch," legendary mascot of the Coast Artillery Corps. The featherless bird remains today as the mascot of the US Army's Air Defense Artillery, which is the direct descendent of the Coast Artillery.



After the meeting adjourned, members took time together to discuss future events and take photos outside the barracks. Below are pictured LTC Welch, 1st SGT Murray, SGT Minton and T-4 Brodzinski.



As the Jack-O-Lantern looks on, all nervously await the impact of Hurricane Sandy to Fort Hancock. Fortunately for all concerned, Battery Gunnison/New Peck did not flood and it is in fine condition after the storm. All wish the same could be said for the coasts of New York, New Jersey and much of Fort Hancock.



Once recovery operations are completed, and the National Park Service can re-open the Fort, public visitation can be anticipated. AGFA members and National Park Rangers will be offering guided tours of Battery Gunnison/ New Peck on weekends during the summer of 2013. For additional information call the Sandy Hook Visitor Center at (732) 872-5970 or visit <http://www.nps.gov/gate/planyourvisit/this-week-at-gateway-nra.htm>.

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