

Coast Artillery Living History Ft. Hancock, NJ

On 20-22 May 2011, the National Park Service in conjunction with the Army Ground Forces Association conducted the annual spring Coastal Defense Day at Battery Gunnison/New Peck, Fort Hancock, NJ. Coastal Defense Day showcases Fort Hancock's rich military heritage using tours and programs at various locations throughout Fort Hancock at Sandy Hook, and marks the opening of the summer season at the Park.

The members of AGFA that participated in the event were Richard Hill, Anne Lutkenhouse, Eric Meiselman, Tom Minton, Shawn Welch, Larry Winchell, Paul Taylor, Gary Weaver, Jerry Still, Luis Ramos, Joe Rosamilia, and our guests Phil Hillman, Kurt Nelsen and Kyle Schafer. 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 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 over a half mile to this site to give them 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 New Peck/Gunnison played as Advance HECP #1's Examination Battery.

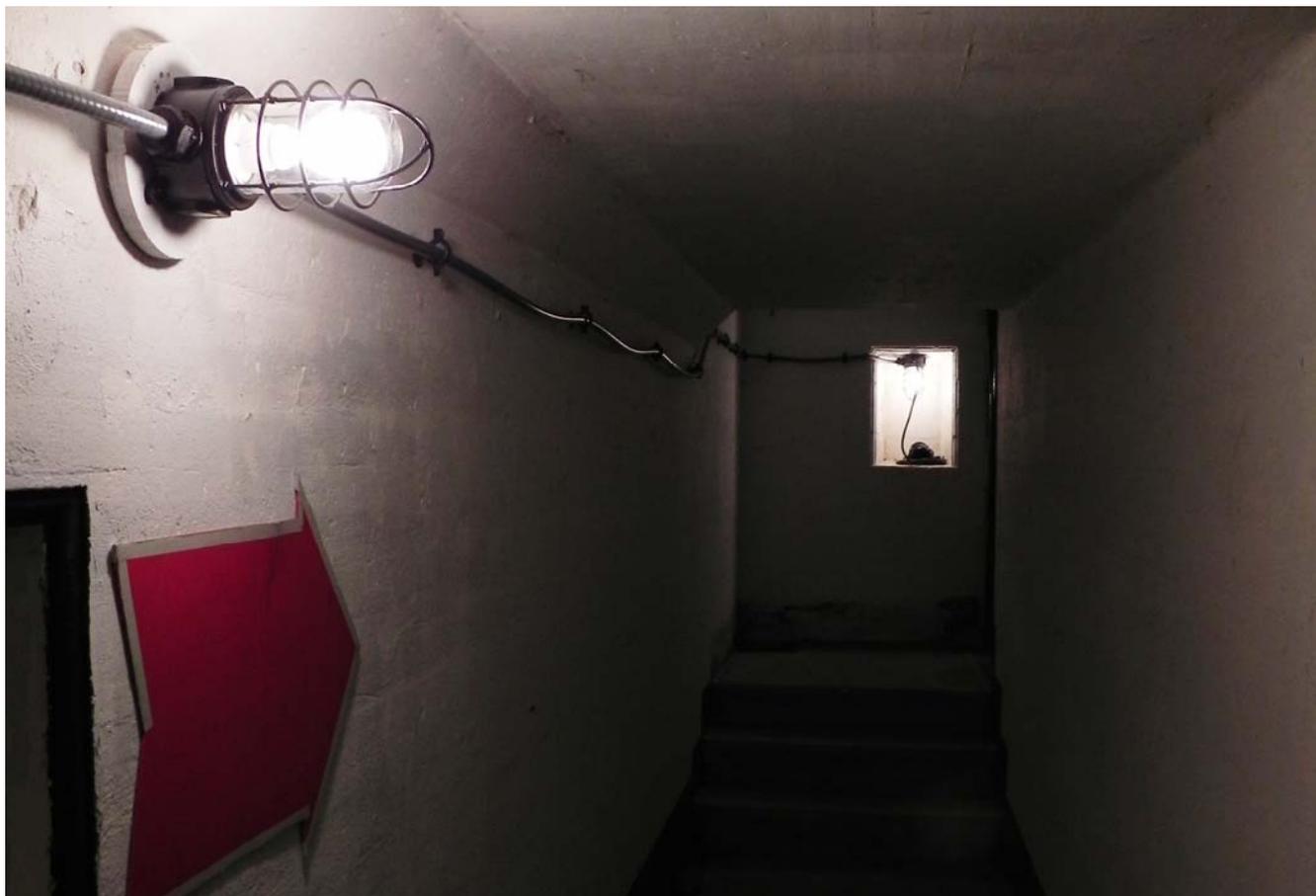
The photo below shows the participating membership the afternoon of Saturday, 21 May, in front of Battery Gunnison/New Peck. This day was in preparation for "Coastal Defense Day". We conducted basic preparation of the battery and practiced gun drills. Some of our members also arrived on this day.



Preparation work for the event actually began on Thursday evening (19 May). AGFA members Shawn Welch, Eric Meiselman and Tom Minton worked until 0230 on Friday morning to install recently restored vintage electrical lighting components in the powder magazines of the Battery. Below, LTC Welch installs a restored 1915 period Corps of Engineers standard light fixture.



The photo below shows two of the three lights and a power receptacle (inside the light niche at the end of the passage) which were installed on Thursday evening.



In addition to the lights in the powder passage, SSG Weaver stands next to the recently restored and newly installed vintage Corps of Engineers Power Panel Box in the plotting room. It is next to the new 200 amp electric service panel that the National Park Service has installed in the battery. This is a major historic improvement to the basic electrical utility structure of the battery.



During earlier work weekends in March and April, additional historic lighting was installed in the chemical warfare and tool rooms. In the photo below, the historic 1915 vintage Corps of Engineers lighting is installed above the work bench, with original cable hangers supporting the cable and a power receptacle (black) affixed to the bench proper.



The photo below shows 2LT Lutkenhouse 's aid station in the Chemical Warfare Room. The light above her head partially obscured by the chemical warfare air pipe is a 1915 Corps of Engineers standard, and the wall light to her right is a WWII Crouse and Hinds fixture with a red bulb to signify the air lock/decontamination station is ready for use.



The photo below shows the rest of the display along with a second 1915 Corps of Engineers light fixture.



Friday 20 May was an extremely rainy day, with showers blowing through constantly. After a very long day of maintenance and preparation work at the Battery, AGFA members prepare for the semi-annual "World War Two Harbor Defense Lantern Tour." The lanterns on the ground in front of the group are vintage 1930's and 1940's Coleman lanterns. Note the rain gear – we weren't leaving anything to chance by the early evening.



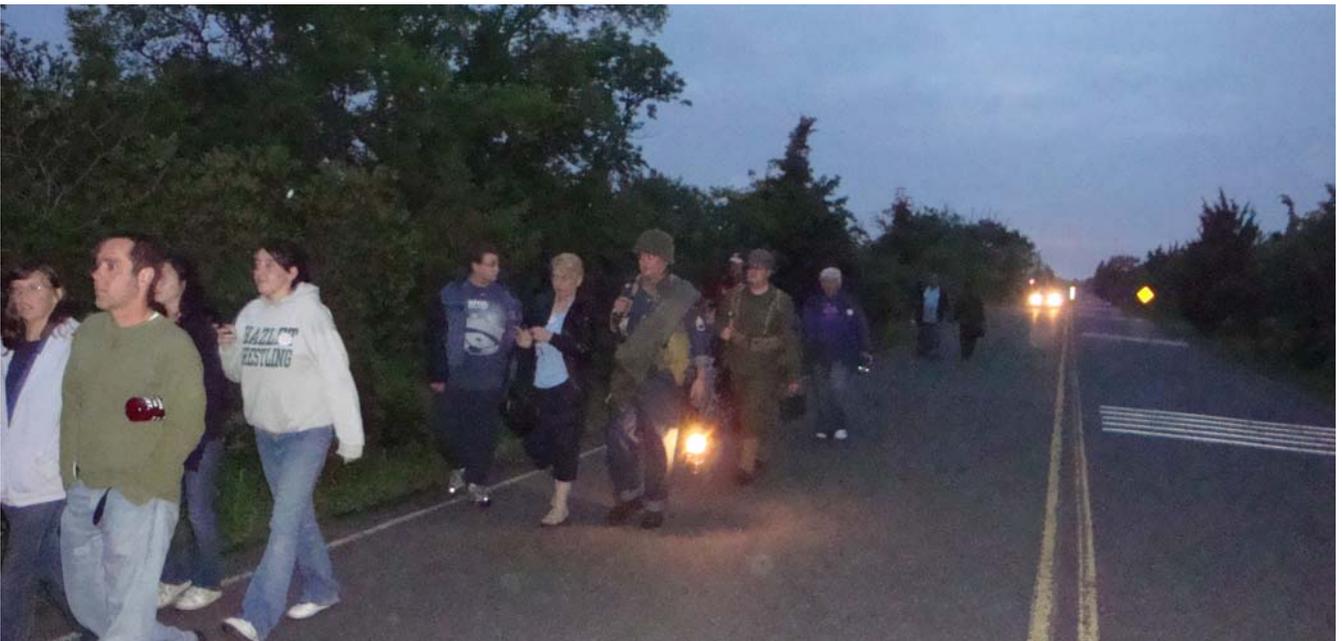
The focus of this unique walking tour was to provide an over-view of the Harbor Defenses of New York from Fort Hancock in 1943. The tour started at the Fort Hancock Museum, formerly the Post Guardhouse. Visitors were welcomed in both a 1943, and a 2011 time-frame. The tour group was very large. In the photo below CPL Minton has his helmet "off" to signify he is speaking to the visitors in 2011 time period. "Hats on" and "Hats Off" is a living history interpretive technique that allows the member to switch between time periods when explaining various facets of the defenses without causing "time period" confusion.



The lantern tour saw the unveiling of the National Park Service's start of the restoration of the Harbor Defense Command Post (HDCP) which was inside the oldest concrete mortar battery in the United States – Battery McCook/Reynolds, built in 1890-1895. Here CPL Minton prepares visitors to enter the battery in the first formal tour of this kind for the fortification in the Park's history.



After exiting the HDCP, the tour proceeded to Battery Gunnison/New Peck with AGFA members providing an "armed escort," as would have been the case with a group of civilian visitors in 1943. The photo below shows the visitors on their way to Battery Gunnison/New Peck via Atlantic Drive, one of the main roads in the Fort.



The tour arrives at the battery, passing through the access control checkpoint the "time portal to 1943", and is assembled into three groups to tour the battery.



The next major restoration work unveiled for the public were the three platform lights on the front of the Gun #1 emplacement. These are vintage 1915 Corps of Engineers lights as would have been installed at the Battery during its reconfiguration in 1943. For safety and maintenance concerns, these lights are installed in such a way that they can be removed when a public event or other need for lighting ends and stored in preparation for the next use.



In the photo below the public sees a gun emplacement fully illuminated as it would have been in 1943. All light fixtures are original and were carefully restored and returned to operable condition. There are a total of five light fixtures, two on the back railing and three on the front of the emplacement. These fixtures are over 80 years old and were all in remarkably outstanding condition prior to restoration. This was the first time that Gun 1's platform has been properly lit since WWII.



In the photo below, the public walks from the plotting room to the magazine. The lights to the right are inside the tool room and the platform lights mounted on the railing of the gun platform are clearly visible.



In contrast to Friday, Saturday dawned bright and sunny. During the day, the members conducted much needed maintenance operations to include checking, cleaning and lubricating the breach block on Gun #2.



We also installed one of the most unique and technical pieces of reproduction equipment – the azimuth ring indicator for Gun #1. The indicator was made especially for this gun by Mr. Henry Komorowski as a donation to our efforts to preserve and restore the Battery. The creation of this instrument provides the ability to accurately point the gun – a critical tool in the process of teaching visitors the critically important principles of trigonometry which are the heart of the Coast Artillery Corps fire control computation process.



Sunday morning broke cold and cloudy and members arose early and prepared to head to a ceremony commemorating a major NIKE Ajax missile accident that had occurred on May 22, 1958, 53 years earlier to the day. In the photo below 2LT Taylor and CPL Winchell prepare for the day and the ceremony.



In the photo below 2LT Lutkenhouse and 2LT Taylor enjoy a cup of coffee to start the day.



The photo below shows the combined NIKE Veteran, NPS and AGFA formation to recognize and honor the deaths of U.S. Army Air Defense Artillery NIKE missile battery crewmen during an accident in the 1950's at the height of the Cold War. The blast occurred at Battery "NY-53," located in nearby Middletown, NJ. Ten Nike-class "Ajax" Surface To Air Missiles (SAMs) accidentally detonated during a routine scheduled upgrade procedure that claimed the lives of six soldiers and four civilian contractors. The size, scale and gruesomeness of the accident drew nation-wide attention and criticism of the NIKE program through the remainder of 1958. The monument, inscribed with the names of those who were lost, was moved to Fort Hancock from the Highlands Army Air Defense Command Post (AADCAP), when that site was closed down in 1974.



After a formal speech by Tom Hoffman, the USNPS Sandy Hook and Ft. Hancock historian, the American flag was raised at the memorial site. Below, 2LT Taylor, 2LT Lutkenhouse, SSG Weaver, CPL Minton, PFC Ramos, PVT Rosamilia, PVT Meiselman, Recruit Nelsen and CPL Winchell salute the United States flag.



The same formation is pictured below at Attention during the remarks portion of the Memorial Ceremony.



Below NIKE Missile veterans stand by the monument marker with National Park Service Ranger Tom Hoffman, the Fort Hancock Historian.



Upon arrival at battery Gunnison/New Peck, the AGFA detail assembled on the Gun #1 platform for practice prior to the arrival of the public. The long pole on the left is the shell rammer and the long pole on the right has the sponge to clean the chamber of sparks and burning embers after firing.



In the photo below, practice drill on Gun #1 is underway.



In the photo below, gun drill begins as CPL Minton moves to open the breach block..



CPL Minton grabs the breach block handle and opens the breach.



As the public arrives, 2LT Lutkenhouse receives the visitors at the 1942 Dodge Ambulance station. If you look closely, one visitor certainly appears out of character. He is a living historian portraying a Hessian soldier. The Hessians were German mercenaries used by the British Army against American forces and civilians during our War of Independence from 1776-83. The interpreter was at the Sandy Hook Light House, giving visitors an overview of British operations on the Sandy Hook peninsula during the American Revolution.



Inside the plotting room, 2LT Taylor provides a technical overview of how the plotting board functions in the generation of firing data. The plotting room is always one of the biggest attractions for visitors, who realize that mathematical equations CAN be tabulated in one's brain, without the need of a calculator.



Once the public left the plotting room, they proceeded on a self-guided tour of the shell and powder magazines. In the photo below, the shells are seen stacked to the left, and various charts explaining munitions are on the right.



Below is another view of the stack of shells – the yellow shells to the right are “explosive” loaded, and the black ones on the left are inert for use in firing “bring to” shots during Examination Battery missions. These “bring to” munitions were either Armor Piercing (AP) or High Explosive (HE) projectiles that did not contain explosive loads. The explosive fillers and fuzes were removed by ordnance personnel, and the weight replaced with sand. The reason for “plugging” the rounds goes beyond rendering a projectile safe to fire as a warning shot. A shell is ready to be fired at a certain “ballistic weight.” If this weight is changed (ie, the shell becoming lighter in weight with no explosive or fuse), the projectile’s ballistic properties will change and in most cases fall considerably short of the target. Note the red arrow to help guide visitors through the magazines. The arrow points to the powder magazine.



In following the red arrow of the self guided tour, the public enters the powder magazine with 300 powder cans. The light on the left wall is one of the newly installed 1915 Corps of Engineer standard lights. The door to the left leads to the powder passage.



As the public moves through the battery, they enter the powder passage mentioned above and pass by the other newly installed 1915 period lighting components.



As they get to the end of the powder passage to proceed up to the gun platform, they see the third 1915 light, and the new power receptacle to support lighting and fixtures for Emplacement Number 1.



In the photo below, AGFA members CPL Winchell, SSG Weaver and PVT Meiselman prepare for the gun drill for members of the public.



The photo below shows the magnitude of public visitors that were on the gun platform throughout most of the day to watch and participate in gun drills. Each successive group seemed grow larger in size, so the Cosmoline Soldiers were always on the move



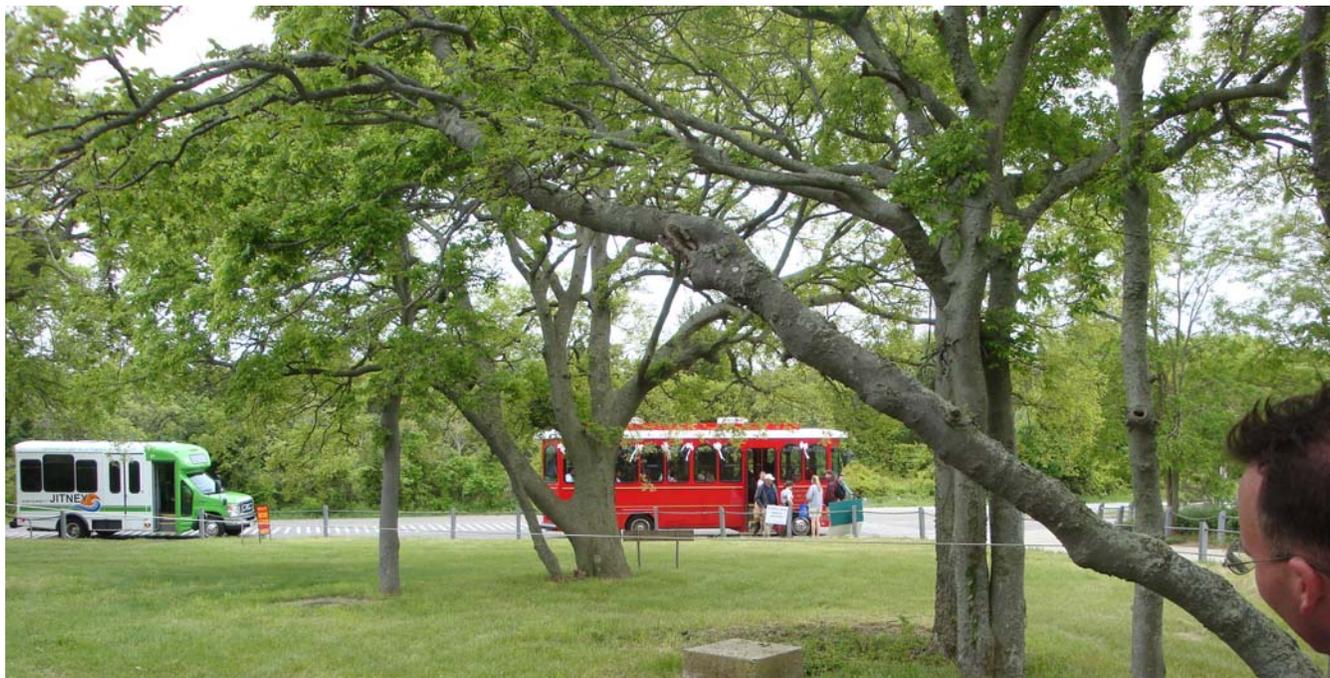
Towards the end of the day, the National Park Service hosted a “vintage vehicle convoy” to include 2LT Lutkenhouse and the NPS 1942 Dodge Ambulance. The other vehicles in the convoy are a 1941 Plymouth staff car, and two Willy’s Jeeps



Below, 2LT Lutkenhouse drives the ambulance past Battery Gunnison/New Peck.



The National Park Service and the Sandy Hook Foundation sponsored two trolleys to take the public from one site to around Fort Hancock on Sunday. Below, the trolleys drop off one of many groups visitors at Battery Gunnison/New Peck.



The public saw many different ships when they looked through the 3-inch M1904 telescopic sight on the M1900 6-inch gun in emplacement #1. Below one of the more unusual sights was a three mast sailing ship.



In the final photo, National Park Service Ranger Dan Meharg who has been instrumental in the restoration and preservation advancements at Battery Gunnison/New Peck joins AGFA members.



Throughout the summer of 2011, AGFA members and US National Park Rangers will be offering guided tours of Battery Gunnison/ New Peck. The Battery will be open on weekends from 1PM to 8PM. For additional information about Battery Gunnison/New Peck and other history based-programs and tours, please call the Sandy Hook Visitor Center at (732) 872-5970 between the hours of 10 AM and 5 PM. Additional programming information may be found at: <http://www.nps.gov/gate/loader.cfm?csModule=security/getfile&PageID=321496>

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