

Coast Artillery Living History Ft. Hancock, NJ

On 21-23 May 2010, 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 thru tours and programs at various locations throughout Sandy Hook.

The members of AGFA that participated in the event were CJ Gutch, Erick Meiselman, Tom Minton, Mike Murray, Shawn Welch, Larry Winchell, Anne Lutkenhouse, Paul Taylor, Gary Weaver, Jerry Still, Luis Ramos, Joe Rosamilia, Richard Hill and Kieren Fletcher. 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 to this site so as 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 Peck/Gunnison played as Advance HECP #1's Examination Battery.

The photo below shows the participating membership on Saturday 22 May in front of Gun #1 of Battery Gunnison/New Peck. This day was focused on work and preparation for the full NPS "Coastal Defense Day" which was conducted on Sunday, 23 May.



Work actually began on Friday afternoon (21 May). In the photo below, 2LT Taylor puts the final painting touches on the unpainted bases of the stack of 6-inch projectiles. Approximately 150 projectiles are in the stack.



While the final work was being done on the 6-inch shells, 1st SGT Murray checked final adjustments on the new traversing brackets and gears of Gun No. 1 by tracking a ship in the Ambrose Channel. The M1900 6-inch rifle now traverses nearly effortlessly thanks to the excellent skills of David Fisher of "Fisher Machine".



There was other site cleanup work to be done as the interpretive season begins. Below, SSG Weaver pauses from his work to clean out the drainage gutters on top of the Battery.



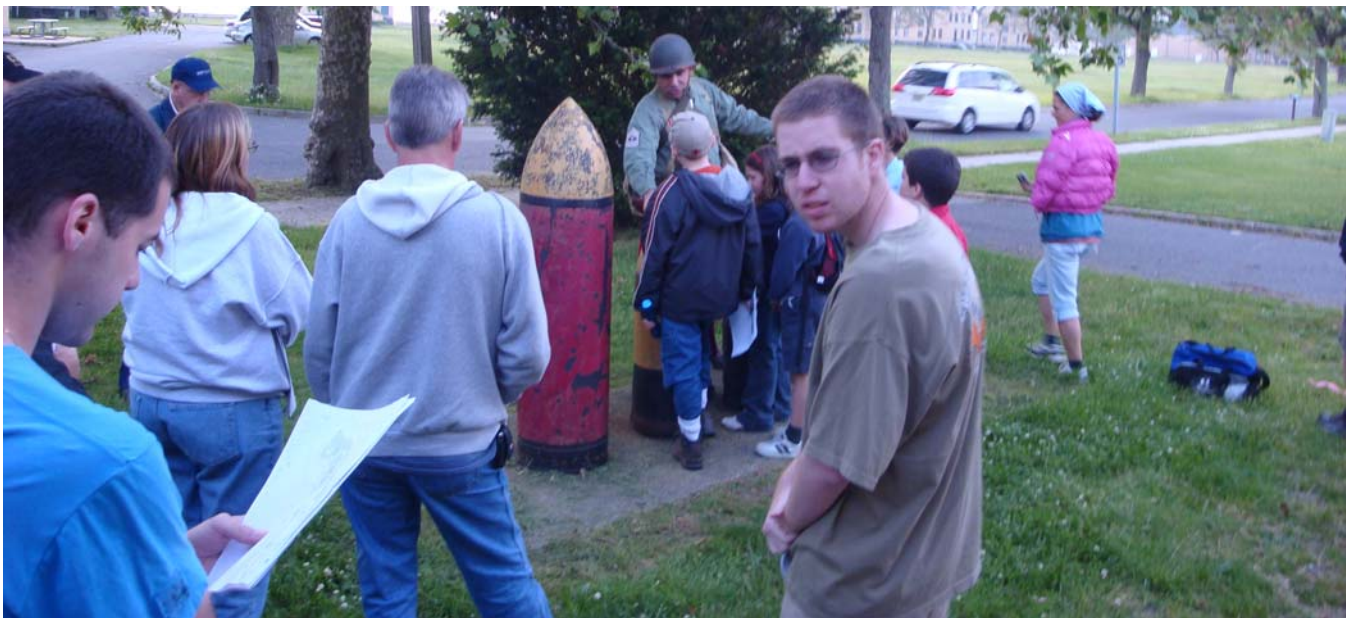
After the maintenance and setup work Friday afternoon for the evening's "Harbor Defense Lantern Tour" were completed, 2LT Taylor prepared the evening meal in the powder magazine. In the photo below, 2LT Taylor is shown cooking beef stew on two vintage Coleman 500 burners from the early 1940's. All of the mess equipment is original, and from the WWII period.



Through the afternoon, the public visited the battery as we continued preparations for the Friday evening Harbor Defense Lantern Tour and completed maintenance projects. In the photo below, 2LT Lutkenhouse and Auxiliary Fletcher greet a group of visitors.



Once the evening meal was served, we prepared for the lantern tour. Starting at the Fort Hancock Guardhouse, which now serves as the NPS Fort Hancock Museum, the tour provided a look at the defenses of New York from a WWII perspective, taking visitors around the Post on foot to the three main components of the Fort Hancock Defenses in 1943: The Harbor Defense Control Post, located in the former Sandy Hook Mortar Battery, the Harbor Entrance Control Post located on the roof of Battery Potter, and the Examination Battery, Battery Gunnison/New Peck. Tour participants were issued special security badges, identical to those that would have been issued to civilians on Fort Hancock in WWII. The tour was conducted in a “first person” impression, with AGFA members personifying actual members of the 245th Coast Artillery Regiment, keeping tour participants solidly locked into a 1943, wartime mindset. This was the first tour of it’s type for AGFA, and it proved quite successful, being well received by the visitors on the tour. In the photo below, 1st Sgt Murray explains large caliber (16-inch) projectiles to visitors while preparing for the lantern tour outside the Ft. Hancock Museum.



During the Lantern Tour, the group passed by Battery Gordon Granger, a 10-inch "disappearing" gun battery built in 1897, and used until 1942. Here, 1st Sergeant Murray explains the operations of the Battery to the visitors.



Due to the large size of the tour group, the visitors were split into two groups once they arrived at the HECP, located on the roof of Battery Potter. Below, as PVT Meiselman stands guard, LTC Welch explains the overall harbor defense structure to the group, utilizing original plans and charts, as well as a rare M1910A1 Azimuth Instrument. Visitors were able to use the instrument to look over the New York harbor area, the City skyline, and track ships entering and leaving the port.



While part of the group was learning of the overall harbor defenses, First Sergeant Murray gave a detailed discussion of the role of the HECF to the remaining visitors. This was conducted on the historic footprint of the HECF, seen here. The structure, made of wood and two stories in height, was built in 1905, and demolished sometime in the 1950's. The two remaining concrete pillars were used to support large optical fire control instruments for tracking ships.



Once at the Battery, the tour group was broken down into smaller groups of ten people each, and sent to the four different interpretive stations. These were the medical display in the Chemical Warfare Room, the Plotting Room, the Powder and Shell Magazines, and Gun Number One. Here, Lt. Lutkenhouse and Auxiliary Fletcher discuss the medical aspects of serving at a Coast Artillery installation.



The tour concluded at Battery Gunnison/New Peck, where visitors were able to see the operations of the Examination Battery. In the photo below, 1st SGT Murray demonstrates the major components of the 6-inch gun in Emplacement One as CPL Minton and PVT Meiselman stand ready to assist.



Directly behind PVT Meiselman in the photo below is a new addition to the battery, a fully restored 1915-era Coast Artillery gun platform light. As coastal artillery batteries were modified through the years, one of the major alterations was the addition of exterior lighting for night firing. With the exception of a new power cord, all parts of this particular light are original, and have been restored to working condition, including the two ceramic light fixtures and the covers. A second light is currently under restoration. The gun platform here at Emplacement One originally had two such platform light assemblies.



The next day, Saturday 22 May, was spent preparing for our interpretive program. The primary focus was to improve the quality and accuracy of the gun crew's loading drill. Below, PVT Gutch, SSG Weaver, PVT Rosamilia, CPL Winchell and 2LT Taylor prepare to conduct gun drill training.



In the photo below, 2LT Taylor (holding a replica powder bag), 2LT Still (Gun Commander), PVT Meiselman and CPL Minton listen in as 1st Sgt Murray (holding paper), prepares to walk the crew through the gun drill.



In addition to the gun drills, the battery personnel practice an "Alert Drill." Once the Battery was re-armed and reconfigured by late April of 1943, it was manned constantly on a 24/7 basis, making it the phalanx of the New York Harbor Defenses. The troops who were stationed at this Battery lived in tents only a few feet away, and literally had to be able fire at a moment's notice if directed by the HECF. The plan for Sunday was to conduct "Alerts", beginning at 1230 and continuing every hour until 1530. Below, the gun crew scrambles from stand by stations to the gun platform.



Conducting an event or workday for AGFA is a multi-functional operation with many things going on simultaneously. Ensuring meals are prepared on time is something that requires a dedicated mess detail. During the gun alert above, 2LT Taylor fueled his Coleman 500 "Speed Master" burner in preparation for lunch. The Speed Master was introduced in 1938 as Coleman's first single burner adjustable camp stove. Sitting next to him is PVT Hill eating an apple and holding his M1917 Enfield rifle before he opens the "access control point" for the battery. Making sure all these events occur on time requires good planning and leadership on the part of all participants. There is more to running the battery than operating the guns.



Once alerted, the Battery begins the actual process of tracking a target and preparing to fire. 1st Sgt Murray is tracking a ship from the Gun Pointer's platform (right), while CPL Winchell prepares to set the range of the gun by elevating or depressing the barrel as needed (left). PVT Gutch holds the sponge in preparation to load a round; the barrel needed to be swabbed out with a mixture of water and ash after each shot so as to extinguish any remaining burning embers of gun powder from the previous shot, before the next round could be safely reloaded. Failure to do so could result in a fatal, premature explosion of the powder bag before the breech could be closed, killing the gun crew, and wrecking the gun.



In the photo below, PVT Hill rams a projectile, as PVT Rosamilia stands by with the powder bag ready to insert it into the breech once the shell detail moves away from the breach area.



With the powder bag inserted into the chamber, PVT Rosamilia moves away from the breech and PVT Meiselman attaches the lanyard to the firing device. A pull of the lanyard would cause a device known as a “primer,” to fire a jet of flame through the breech, and igniting the powder bag. In the meantime, 1st SGT Murray is looking through the M1904 telescopic sight to ensure that the gun is pointed at the correct target, as assigned by the Harbor Entrance Control Post (HECP).



Below, 2LT Still observes from the Gun Commander's position, as CPL Winchell checks the elevation (range) and 1st Sgt Murray ensures the gun is on right target, PVT Meiselman then pulls the lanyard, “firing” the gun.



Since these are loading drills, the munitions are “dummy rounds” and after each round is loaded, the reverse procedure of extracting them from the barrel is executed. Below, PVT Hill extracts the projectile as SSG Weaver and CPL Minton hold the loading tray in position, ready to catch the shell.



After several drill sessions, the crew review their actions and compares notes, preparing for the next practice session and the switching of gun positions. The intent was to give every member a chance to practice the different duties of the gun crew. In this photo, 2LT Still and 1st Sgt Murray review the M1900 gun drill manual, and critique it against the practice just conducted. The results proved positive, and with practice, AGFA members were able to consistently load the gun in the same manner and 15-second time cycles used by the Coast Artillery 66 years ago.



On Saturday evening, the members gathered in the barracks, Bldg 41 for the evening meal. Building 41, which originally served as Fort Hancock's Post Office during WWII, is one of the few remaining wooden, or "Temporary" buildings constructed during that conflict. Here, 2LT Still, 2LT Lutkenhouse and PVT Rosamilia cook up some spaghetti for dinner.



Everyone sits down to eat, and discuss the day's events.



At 1200 on Sunday, 23 May, the membership gathered for a quick group photograph as the public arrived. While we were taking our photos, several members of the public also took pictures of us in front of Battery Gunnison/New Peck.



In the photo below, the trolley hired by the Sandy Hook Foundation drops off visitors to the battery. The trolleys proved quite successful, helping over 300 visitors arrive at Battery Gunnison/New Peck in a 5 hour time frame.



Prior to entry at the battery, visitors were greeted at the “security checkpoint” and received an “in-briefing,” which included an appraisal of the world situation for May 1943 and the conduct of our living history presentation, and were then issued a visitor’s security badge. As this was a tactical area in 1943, security would have been very tight.



In the photo below, PVT Hill and LTC Welch issue security badges to the visitors after their in-briefing.



The first interpretive station after the checkpoint was the medical station, located in the Battery's Chemical Warfare Room. Below, 2LT Lutkenhouse and Auxiliary Fletcher await visitors.



Below, a group of visitors approaches the medical station and are greeted outside by Auxiliary Fletcher.



Below, 2LT Taylor provides an overview of the Plotting Room operations to visitors. The Plotting Room is the mathematical brain of any Coast Artillery battery, and is where the range and azimuth to the target is generated from observed target data, and then sent via the telephone network to the gun crew. Coast Artillery fire control and position finding is an exercise in applied trigonometry.



After visiting the Plotting Room, the visitors have the option to visit either the gun platform or the ammunition magazines. Below, PFC Ramos provides instruction on 6-inch ammunition in the magazine.



The biggest draw was Gun #1 – below, the magnitude of the public attendance is apparent.



PVT Rosamilia holds a powder bag, while 2LT Still explains the different parts of the gun drill as the public looks on. With gun drills being conducted every 20 minutes, the AGFA members would do two “run through” gun drills, and then step aside to let members of the public become “Cosmoline Soldiers.” These drills proved to be quite popular, with an average of 30 people attending and participating in each one.



In the photo below, several youngsters have already been rotated into the gun crew.. PVT Rosamilia assists a young boy in preparing to carry the powder bag to the breach, while CPL Minton and CPL Winchell assist two children in placing the projectile into the breach.



Below, CPL Winchell shows two young visitors how to properly and safely carry the shell tray.



As the crew prepares for another drill, two visitors man the gun pointer and range setter's positions.



Below, the troops instruct a new group of participants in the various duties of the gun crew.



All organizations depend upon their Non-Commissioned Officers to conduct the detailed work of accomplishing key tasks. Below, CPL Minton, SSG Weaver and 1st Sgt Murray pose behind Gun #1.



Planning is key, and the officers of AGFA excel in this task. Below 2LT Taylor, 2LT Lutkenhouse, LTC Welch and 2LT Still pose behind Gun #1.



As the day ends, PVT Hill and PFC Ramos rest on a concrete pad, contemplating the next event.



Throughout the summer of 2010, 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 5PM. For additional information call the Sandy Hook Visitor Center at (732) 872-5970.

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