

Coast Artillery Living History
Fort Hancock, NJ

On 15 & 17 May 2026, the National Park Service (NPS) conducted the annual spring Coast Defense and Ocean Fun Day event (sponsored by New Jersey Sea Grant Consortium (<http://njseagrant.org/>) in conjunction with the Army Ground Forces Association (AGFA). Coast Defense Day showcases Fort Hancock's rich military heritage thru tours and programs at various locations throughout Fort Hancock which occupies the Sandy Hook peninsula. The entire peninsula is designated "The Fort Hancock and Sandy Hook Proving Ground National Historic Landmark District".

The educational objective was to provide interpretation of the Coast Artillery mission at Fort Hancock in the World War Two-era, focusing on May 1943.

The members of AGFA who participated over the three days were Jacob and Janessa Ansley, Tony Antonucci, Callum Bujdos, Donna Cusano, Paul Cusano, Joe Di Giovanni, Joel Gonzalez, Richard King, Bryce Kleeman, Henry & Mary Komorowski, Anne Lutkenhouse, Tom Morrison, Larry Mihlon, Mike Murray, Pat Ragosta, John Uhler, Gary and Deanna Weaver, and Shawn Welch, along with our guests Tony Ricci, Ken Scarano and Nick Casseus.

AGFA focused on the activation of two 6-inch M1900 barbette carriage guns at New Battery Peck (formerly Battery Gunnison). The battery structure was significantly modified between March and May 1943. Gun #1 arrived on 8 April and Gun #2 arrived on 21 May. Beginning in April 1943, Battery Gunnison transformed into Battery Peck.

The tactical focus of the event was the ongoing naval war in the Atlantic and German naval threat to include shelling by surface vessels and submarine deck guns. The event covered the operation of the Advance Harbor Entrance Control Post ("HECP") Number 1, which was located at Fort Hancock, and the role that Battery Peck played as Advance HECP #1's Examination Battery.

The photo below from Sunday 17 May shows that day's participants in front of the machine shop and magazine door areas.



Friday morning was the start of preparations for the event weekend. Below PVT Ansley, SGT/T-4 Bujdos and PFC Ansley begin setup of Gun #1.



Below PVT Ansley, PFC Ansley, Mr. Mihlon and LTC Welch discuss the various aspects of the gun and carriage.



Below the medical displays begin to come out of their boxes during the day's setup activities.



Below SGT/T-4 Bujdos continues setup of the Chemical Warfare exhibit.



Below is a collection of four US Army gas masks used during WWII. The mask on the left is an "optical" mask which is designed for soldiers to better see through optical fire control instruments. The large "U" shaped item is actually a "gas alarm" - it makes a unique sound when struck.



Below is part of the Ammunition display that includes cut away fuses, 3-inch and 90mm shells and shell fragments.



Below is the Battery Commander's Station upon setup completion. It has an M1910A1 Azimuth Instrument, two EE-91 telephones and MC-153 Time-Interval bell.



Below is a view through the M1910A1 with a ship in the distance.



Around noon the team took a break and ate lunch near Mr. Mihlon's 1938 Plymouth.

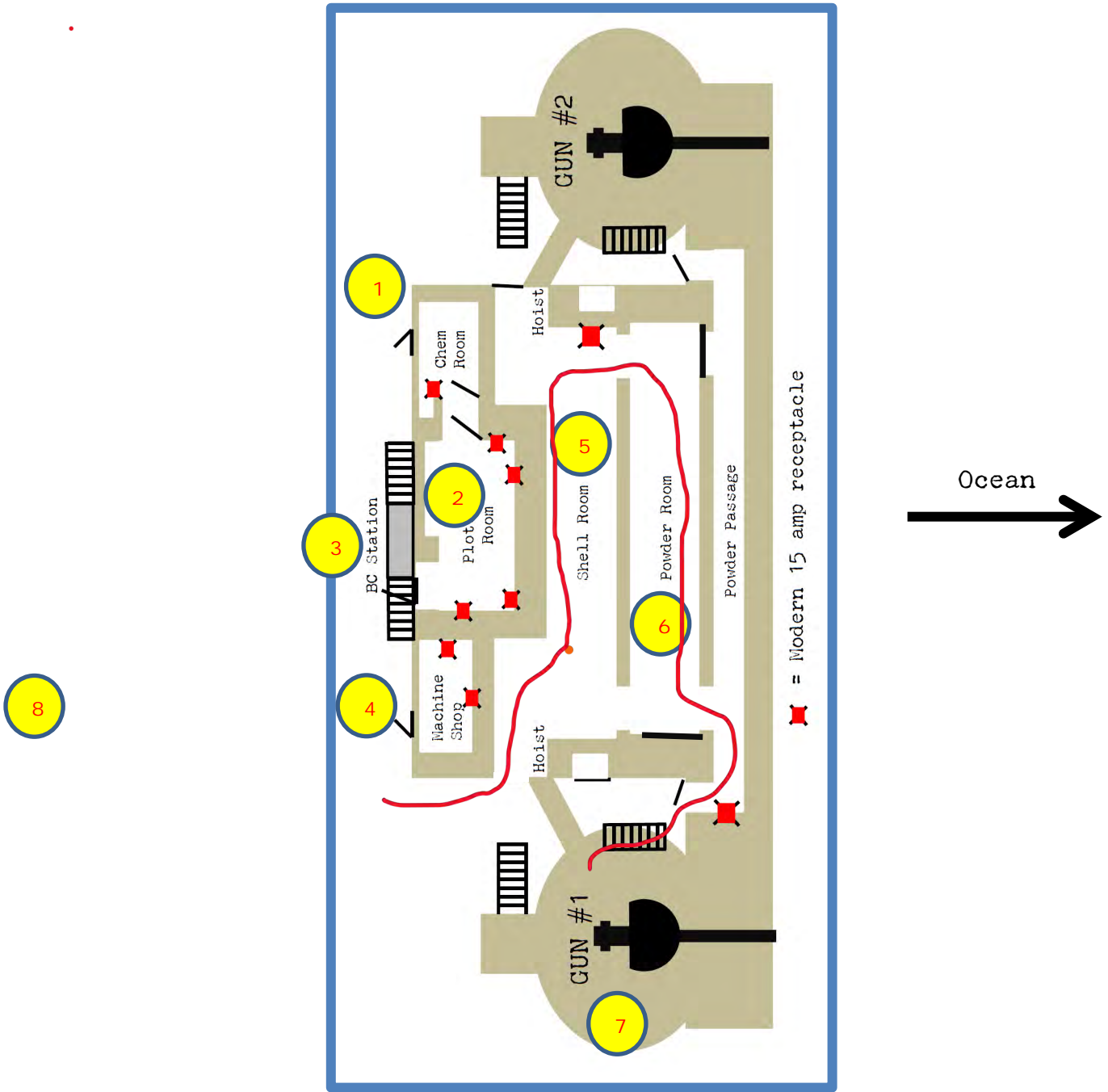


The powder magazine contained many electrical items that are part of current projects. On the left are eight restored platform lights for 9-gun Battery's four emplacements for Batteries Bloomfield and Richardson. On the right are over 56 Corps of Engineers Standard light fixtures restored for use in the Harbor Defense Command Post (HDCP) inside the Mortar Battery.



The Lantern Tour included eight specific display stations addressing major topic areas. They are:

- a. Station #2 (Medical - Chemical Warfare room)
- b. Station #3 (Plotting Room)
- c. Station #4 (Battery Commander's Station)
- d. Station #5 (Machine Shop)
- e. Station #6 (Ammunition/Chemical Warfare/9-gun lighting)
- f. Station #7 (electric projects/Mine Operations/Chaplain)
- g. Station #8 (Gun #1)
- h. Station #9 (1938 Plymouth - automobile gas rationing & home front)
- j. Red line shows path from station #5 through #6 to #7 to #8.



The photo below was taken just before the team deployed for the lantern tour.



Below the walking team for the lantern tour stops outside the corridor entrance for the southwest pit of Battery Reynolds (HDCP/mortar battery). In February and March the AGFA team cleared the trees and vegetation off the walls and slopes in this area and for the first time in fifteen years one can see all the way to the back wall of the southwest mortar pit.



The photo below shows the lantern tour group moving towards the HDCP/mortar battery.



During movement towards Battery Peck, SGT Cusano takes a few moments to outline the impact of America's fledgling aviation program. On this date in 1938 the Army Air Corps held its first aerial maneuvers out of Mitchell Field NY. Many of these aircraft's operations were conducted over Fort Hancock and in support of the Harbor Defenses of New York.



Below in Station #5, PFC Ansley discusses Chemical Warfare items with members of Boy Scout Troop 116.



The discussion continues with another group that includes National Park Rangers.



Below at Station #6, MSG King discusses the various electrical restoration projects underway with visitors.



Inside the machine shop (Station #4), TSG Weaver discusses how AGFA uses vintage machines in its restoration missions.



Below is another view of TSG Weaver inside the machine shop with visitors from Boy Scout Troop 116.



Below at Station #6, CPT(CH) Uhler is prepared to discuss the Chaplaincy as visitors finish up with MSG King in the background.



At station #8, Mr. Mihlon discusses civilian employees at Fort Hancock and the impact of rationing and operating privately-owned vehicles during wartime.



Below a Boy Scout climbs the stairs to Station #3, the Battery Commander's Station, as visitors arrive at Station #8.



The photo below shows visitors looking through the M1910A1 Azimuth Instrument.



Below is a tug boat just off Fort Hancock through the M1910A1 Azimuth Instrument at dusk.



Below PVT Ansley takes a photo through the M1910A1 Azimuth Instrument as the team prepares to secure the Battery after the lantern tour.



Below is the subject of PVT Ansley's photo - the Coney Island Jump Tower through the M1910A1 Azimuth Instrument. This was an original "bench mark" for orienting the instrument during WWII. The Jump Tower was moved to Coney Island after the 1939-40 World's Fair in NYC.



Below is Station #7 - Gun #1 as SGT Cusano and SGT/T-4 Bujdos chat with visitors.



Below the final tour group discusses the M1900 6-inch gun with AGFA members.



Below at Station #8, Mr. Mihlon is finishing up with the last tour group.



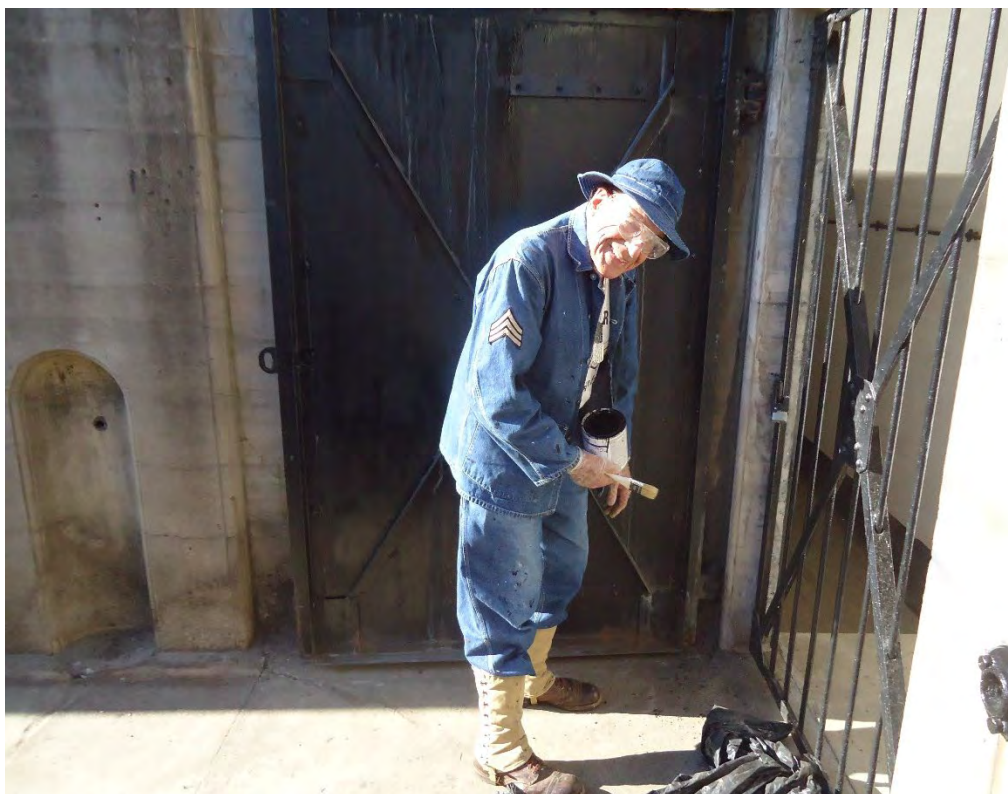
Back at the barracks, CPT(CH) Uhler and SGT Cusano enjoy a cup of seltzer and relaxation.



Saturday morning was busy at Battery Peck. Below SSG/T-3 Komorowski explains the plotting board to a visitor.



Soon after we opened on Saturday, SGT Cusano noticed significant rusting at the bottom of the Gun #1 powder passage door. He used a drill with wire brush to remove the rust and then applied marine enamel paint.



Below a group of visitors chat with members outside the plotting room.



At noon, the team gathered for lunch in the plotting room - sandwiches which were contained in the silver canister on the plotting board.



For internal education, half the AGFA team took a 3 hour "tactical walk" to see specific sites at Fort Hancock. Below is the 14-inch gun turret test block at the Sandy Hook Proving Ground.



Below SGT/T-4 Bujdos shows SGT Cusano, PFC and PVT Ansley historic information about the test block.



Along the walk we found several large pieces of test armor. The piece below is about eight inches thick and likely weighs around two or three tons. It shows the effects of a heavy shell penetration.



While we were looking at the armor plates, we were visited by a team of NPS Bio-Techs - one of whom had attended the previous night's Lantern Tour.



Below the team walk the Sandy Hook Proving Ground gunline.



To the north of the gun line is the storage area as shown in the wayside sign below. Hidden amongst the trees are the last four remaining “gun skids” where guns awaiting testing were staged. This field is supposed to be cleared - we are awaiting action from the NPS.



The next stop was Battery Potter. Below PVT Ansley reads the wayside sign while SGT/T-4 Bujdos and SGT Cusano look on.



In front of the entrance to Battery Potter are many 12-inch shells. The one below with the flat point is a 1,046 lbs. mortar deck piercing shell.



At about 1800 hours we had dinner at the Mule Barn Tavern (<https://www.mulebartavern.com/>) which is always a welcome respite.



Another view at the end of our meal.



Sunday morning began with breakfast in the barracks. Below (L-R) Mrs. Weaver, MSG King, SGT/T-4 Bujdos, 1LT Lutkenhouse, PVT Ansley, 2LT Cusano and SGT Ragosta enjoy conversation and coffee.



Below is another photo of the team as they prepare for the day.



Below 1LT Lutkenhouse and 2LT Cusano stand next to the M1 Collective Protector - a chemical air filtration system for the plotting room and the only such operable system in the USA.



Below PFC Kleeman secures an M1903 Springfield Rifle as SGT Antonucci records the issue of the rifle in the log book.



Below our guest LT Tony Ricci unveils his newly restored jeep with markings identifying it as part of the Harbor Defenses of New York Military Police Section.



Below the bumpers of the jeep show the identification of HDNY - "Patrol 15".



Below 2LT Di Giovanni assembles his replica M1917A1 .30 caliber anti-aircraft machinegun. There were several of these guns assigned to protect Battery Peck from low flying aircraft during WWII.



Below 2LT Di Giovanni prepares to greet visitors.



Below is a closeup view of the M1917A1 .30 caliber machinegun. The hose to the right is what supplies water to the large jacket surrounding the barrel for cooling.



Below the sights on the M1917A1 are shown - these are actually very rare anti-aircraft sights.



The photo below was taken right before opening to the public at 1100 hours.



Below the team gathers for last minute thoughts and questions.



The plotting room was busy throughout the day. Below 2LT Cusano discusses the operations inside the room with about ten visitors.



Below SSG/T-3 Komorowski discusses the 1940 "shaping" machine with visitors.



Lunch was eaten "on the go" - below SGT Ragosta and PFC Kleeman grab sandwiches as 1LT Lutkenhouse looks on.



Below CPT(CH) Uhler discusses military chaplain operations with visitors in the powder magazine.



Below MSG King discusses the electrical control system for the 9-gun platform light electrical project with NPS Interpretation Supervisor Jennifer Cox as 1LT Lutkenhouse listens to the discussion.



Below Ranger Jen Cox and SSG/T-3 Komorowski chat outside the plotting room.



The key demonstration for Coast Defense Days is the loading drills on the M1900 6-inch guns. Below (L-R) is SGT Cusano, PFC Kleeman, PFC Ansley, SGT Antonucci, 2LT Gonzalez, SGT Ragosta and 1SG Murray.



1943 was a serious time and the soldiers' individual weapons are shown below (all demilitarized) - six M1903 Springfields, one M1 Garand and one M1928 "Tommygun".



Below the team prepares for a gun drill.



Below the shell is being rammed into the breach of the gun.



Below the team pauses with 2LT Gonzalez holding the breach block handle, PVT Casseus checking his gloves and SGT Ragosta checking his belt.



Below another drill begins with SGT Ragosta aiming the gun, PVT Casseus opening the breach and 1SG Murray preparing to remove the "spent" primer.



Below the team removes the drill shell using the “drill shell extractor rod” by inserting the rod’s hook into the white recess and grabbing the crossbar.



Below PFC Kleeman and PFC Ansley carry the shell away from the gun breach.



Below the team prepares for another drill. SGT Antonucci sets elevation, SGT Ragosta keeps the gun aimed at its target, 2LT Gonzalez operates the breach block as 1SG Murray stands by.



Below 2LT Cusano takes a quick break from the near-constant stream of visitors.



Below 1LT Lutkenhouse speaks with a special visitor - Commander Blonk of the US Public Health Service - they are discussing the medical equipment and specifically the 1943 Picker Field X-Ray machine.



Below CDR Blonk, his friend and NPS Ranger Bill Casey chat near the machine shop.



Below PFC Kleeman and a visitor chat with 2LT Gonzalez in the Battery Commander's Station.



Below is a view of a dredging assembly just off the shore at Fort Hancock.



Below 1LT Lutkenhouse chats with visitors in the plotting room.



The day ended at 1630 hours and breakdown of the Battery began. Below PFC Kleeman, PFC Ansley and SGT/T-4 Bujdos begin to secure Gun #1.



Below 1SG Murray, SGT Ragosta, SGT Cusano, and PVT Casseus turn-in their rifles and equipment to SGT Antonucci.



Below 2LT Cusano and 1LT Lutkenhouse disassemble and box the various medical displays.



Below SGT Antonucci and 2LT Di Giovanni disassemble the M1917A1 .30 caliber water cooled Anti-Aircraft machinegun.



With Battery Gunnison/New Battery Peck fully secured, another “Coast Defense Days” weekend comes to an end. The Battery will be open during the summer for scheduled workdays. AGFA’s schedule can be reviewed at <http://armygroundforces.org/new-events.htm> and on the NPS calendar. Learn about the Mule Barn Tavern at Fort Hancock by visiting <https://www.mulebarntavern.com/>. For additional information regarding the Fort Hancock and Sandy Hook Proving Ground National Historic Landmark District visit the NPS website <https://www.nps.gov/gate/index.htm> or call (732) 872-5970.