

## Coast Artillery Living History Ft. Hancock, NJ

On 22-24 October 2010, the National Park Service (NPS), in conjunction with the Army Ground Forces Association (AGFA), conducted the annual Fort Hancock Day weekend at Battery Gunnison/New Peck, at Fort Hancock, NJ, commemorating the founding of the fort, named in honor of Major General Winfield Scott Hancock, an American Civil War hero, on 30 October 1895.

The members of AGFA that participated in the event were Andy Bennett, Rich Hill, Doug Houck, Anne Lutkenhouse, Eric Meiselman, Tom Minton, Joe Rosamilia, Paul Taylor, Luis Ramos, Gary Weaver and Shawn Welch. The educational objective was to provide interpretation of the Coast Artillery mission at Fort Hancock in the World War Two-era, specifically 1943, with a focus on the role of Battery Gunnison/New Peck as the Examination Battery for the New York Harbor Defenses, supporting the Advance Harbor Entrance Control Post (HECP) # 1, which was located at Fort Hancock. The tactical focus of the event was supporting the ongoing war against the German U-boats by guarding the harbor against the threat of saboteur activity or the shelling of Fort Hancock by submarines using their deck guns.

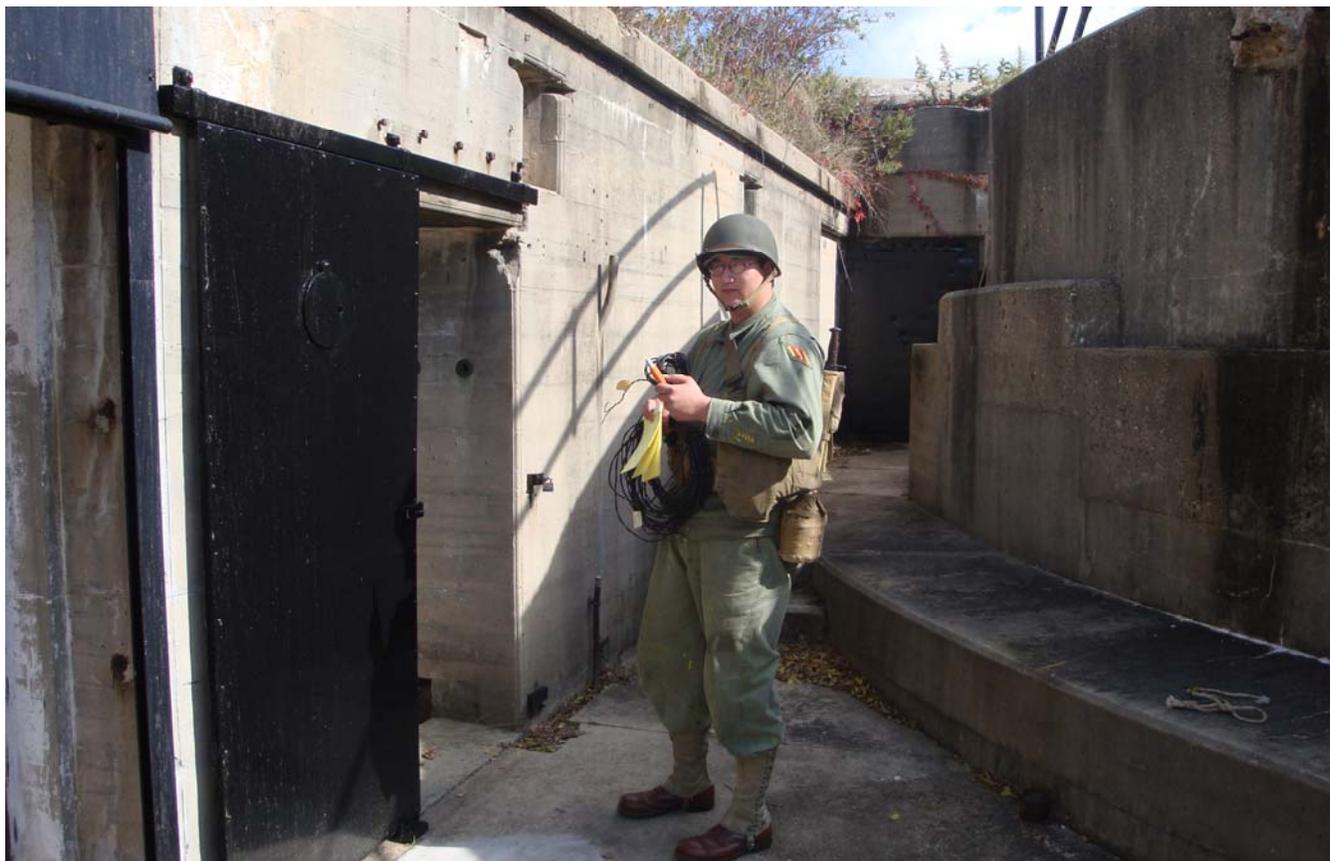
By 1943, with the Battle for the Atlantic still raging and with German submarines prowling offshore, New York Harbor was a "Shoot First, Ask Later" environment. Any vessel acting suspiciously or failing to follow the commands of the HECP as it entered the harbor would be brought under fire with a warning shot from Battery Gunnison/New Peck. A failure to stop at that point would be met with Gunnison/New Peck opening fire on the ship to sink it, called "Destructive Fire". In this capacity, on 20 October 1943, the battery actually fired upon three different ships that were not following directions, on orders from the Harbor Entrance Control Post (HECP). Two of the vessels were a pair of US Navy minesweepers, clearly indicating that even the Navy had to follow proper protocol as they entered or left the harbor. The third ship was a merchant freighter. This high tension action was portrayed for the public during realistic gun drills on both Saturday and Sunday.

The event began with the first members arriving on Friday morning. Beginning in the early afternoon, equipment was secured, communications cables were connected and telephones and electric lights installed on the gun platform. The battery was brought to "general readiness" by 1600 in the afternoon, in time for the members to have a quick dinner before hosting of a nighttime Harbor Defenses Lantern Tour for the public. On Saturday and Sunday, Battery Gunnison/New Peck was open to the public with gun loading demonstrations and interpretation of the plotting rooms and ammunition magazines. On Saturday evening the Army Ground Forces Association also conducted its annual business meeting.

The photo below shows the participating membership on Saturday 23 October in front of the battery plotting room with a historic 1942 Dodge ambulance, which was one of the highlights of the event. In the upper right corner of the photograph is the Battery Commander's station with an M1910A1 azimuth instrument installed on the instrument pier. The NPS and AGFA are developing options for replacing the stairs to the station so it can be restored and interpreted, and so the public can have access to it.



Work began quickly on Friday afternoon (22 October). In the photo below, PVT Meiselman begins installing and running communications cables from the terminal box inside the telephone booth in front of him to the three gun platform phones. The door on the telephone booth is a brand new partnership reconstruction accomplished using donations to the National Park Service and the efforts and talents of Mr. David Fisher of Fisher Machine.



Below 2LT Anne Lutkenhouse arrives with the ambulance at the battery parade in preparation for the evening lantern tour.



Below 2LT Lutkenhouse begins setup of materials inside the ambulance.



In the photo below, members begin preparation for the evening Harbor Defense Lantern Tour.



In the photo below, the ambulance is illuminated as the moon begins to rise prior to the arrival of the tour group.



The lantern tour also experienced one of AGFA's latest restoration projects, which was the replacement of the external electrical lights on Gun Platform #1. These platform lights date from the 1915 time period and are newly restored. These and three additional lights (not yet restored) on the front of the platform provided light to the gun crews during night engagements. The lights originally used in the fixtures were 34 watts. Currently, the bulbs most closely matching them that are available in 2010 are 40 watts, providing enough illumination for operations on the platform. See if someone can use a basic photo editing program to get rid of that red power chord; if you want, I can do it..



In the photo below, SGT Andy Bennett provides an orientation in the use of the M3 plotting board to the public. During the day, one member of AGFA would interpret the plotting room, while the majority of the members would participate in gun drills at Gun #1.



In this photo, 2LT Taylor provides a detailed description of the functioning of the plotting board and the plotting room. The plotting room is the nerve center of every Coast Artillery battery; firing data on the range, speed and bearing of an enemy ship would be tabulated here, and would then be telephoned straight to the guns.



Simultaneously, a gun detail executed loading drills with the public at Gun #1. As always, this part of the event was a high point for visitors, with them getting a chance to go “hands on” with the gun and its equipment. After AGFA members would perform “dry runs” for the public to provide an overview, volunteers were pulled from the crowd and integrated into the gun crew to perform loading drills for themselves. In the photo below, the shell and powder charge have been inserted into the chamber, and the Chief of Breach is preparing to close the breach block.



In this photo, a gun drill is just beginning as the Chief of Breach opens the breach block while the gun commander for the drill prepares to wipe off the mushroom head of the Obturator spindle. This was an important step, so as to ensure that no remnants of burning gun powder were still on the breach block. As the public participated side by side with AGFA members, they were timed to see if they could perform the drill in the same 15-second time interval used in 1943. With a little practice, each “crew” performed quite well.



While gun drills were ongoing, PFC Ramos conducted tours of the magazine. Here he has a small group as he explains the operations of powder magazine.



Below, PFC Ramos is standing in front of the projectiles stored within the shell magazine, and to his right is the lunch ration of sandwiches and hard boiled eggs. The sandwiches were stored inside the two round Mermite inserts on the table, just behind him to his right. These Mermite cans, which were manufactured between 1942 and 1943, are internal containers for a larger thermos to hold either hot or cold food. The two cans pictured would fit, along with a third can, into the Mermite Can, which, in effect, is a large insulated container.



On Saturday evening, the membership conducted the Association's annual business meeting which began after a catered meal. The meeting was held in the Fort Hancock Firehouse meeting room. The Army has uniforms for all occasions, and for certain events, formal dress is required. Following this tradition, AGFA members are seen in the photo below wearing the "Class A" or service dress uniforms, reserved for important moments such as Regimental dinners or affairs, parades, or going home on leave. This moment was no exception.



Just before the meal four of our members pause at the entrance to the firehouse for a quick photo. The firehouse, built in the 1890's, still serves today as the primary fire station for Sandy Hook and the NPS.



After the meeting, many of the attending members walked out to the c. 1869 20-inch Rodman cannon to pose for a night photograph. It is one of two of the largest muzzle-loading cannon ever built. (The other is on display at Fort Hamilton in Brooklyn, NY). This cannon has been at Sandy Hook since the 1870's. It has remained in its current position since the Civilian Conservation Corps built a base for it as a monument in the 1930's. Since then, U.S. Army soldiers stationed at Sandy Hook posed with it constantly for photos until the fort closed on December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1974. This particular photo was taken without a flash.



This photo was taken with the flash. Which one do you like best?



On Sunday morning, the logistics of feeding the troops took priority before heading to the Battery. In the photo below, PVT Meiselman pours fresh coffee into our 1940's era AeroVoid thermos. In the background, SSG Weaver prepares breakfast.



In the photo below, PVT Rosamilia, CPL Minton and 2LT Lutkenhouse make sandwiches for lunch. In keeping with historic accuracy, the sandwiches were wrapped up in real wax paper (still available today!) and then stored in the round Mermite canisters, exactly as it would have been done in the 1940's.



The 1942 Dodge ambulance was displayed on the battery parade, just in front of the plotting room. In the photo below, after touring the ambulance and medical display, 2LT Lutkenhouse escorts visitors to the plotting room entrance.



At Gun #1, members are seen preparing to conduct a gun loading drill. SSG Weaver is making a communications check with his head and chest set and PVT Rosamilia adjusts his helmet as they prepare for the drill.



While the membership prepares for the drill, SGT Bennett shows the breach assembly to a visitor. In the foreground, laying on the platform, is one of the new “powder bags”. Member CPL Minton constructed these bags. They simulate the weight (37 pounds!) and rigidity of the actual bags. They are an excellent addition to the gun drill material.



In the photo below, PVT Meiselman assists several visitors in examining and using the fire control telephone equipment. All of the fire control communications equipment is functional and connected through a switchboard in the plotting room.



After each gun drill, the public had the opportunity to see what a gunner would have seen through the M1904 telescopic sight on the 6-inch M1900 seacoast rifle. In the photo below, a large cruise ship passes in front of the battery, roughly 4 miles away.



In this photo, PVT Rosamilia and CPL Minton install an M1910A1 azimuth instrument and telescope on the pedestal inside the Battery Commander's station. One of AGFA's objectives is to restore the stairs to the station so the public can observe ships in the Sandy Hook and Ambrose channels, much as the battery commander did in 1943.



During both Saturday and Sunday families and small groups of people visited the battery. We estimated over 400 people attended the event through the course of the weekend. Below, a family passes in front of the tool room and prepares to enter the plotting room.



In addition to the plotting room, many people interacted with and experienced the medical detachment in front of the battery. Below, 2LT Lutkenhouse and a young visitor, wearing the equipment a combat medic would have worn, carry a stretcher as PVT Meiselman looks on in front of the 1942 Dodge ambulance. The ambulance was a major draw for the public, and was enjoyed by both young and old visitors alike.



By Sunday evening, another event was drawing to a close, and with it, the end of the 2010 season. This event capped off a lot of hard work by AGFA and the NPS over the past year, paving the way for more great accomplishments surely to come in 2011. The photo below, taken late Sunday afternoon, shows the majority of the participating members taking a final in front of Gun #1, a 6-inch M1900 seacoast rifle, Serial Number 23, manufactured by Watervliet Arsenal in Albany New York, in 1903. The gun will be tightly secured and covered to keep out the weather during the harsh winter months ahead.



The battery will be closed during the winter except for special occasional tours. Association workdays at the battery that are open to the public during the spring and summer months will be listed in the Park's seasonal activities guide. The battery will open again for the public beginning on Coastal Defense Days on 22-23 May 2011 and weekends during the summer of 2011. For additional information, call the Sandy Hook Visitor Center at (732) 872-5970 or consult the seasonal activity guide available at the NPS website <http://www.nps.gov/gate/planyourvisit/thingstodosandyhook.htm> and also at <http://www.nps.gov/gate/planyourvisit/this-week-at-shu.htm>.

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