The 13th Coast Artillery at Pensacola: The Fort Barrancas Oral History Project

by
David P. Ogden

Gulf Islands National Seashore
Florida District

U.S. National Park Service
Revised 1987

On the western end of Santa Rosa Island off the coast of Northwest Florida, amidst the sand dunes and sea oats in what is now a part of Gulf Islands National Seashore, lie scattered concrete structures along with an assortment of brick and wood frame buildings which once housed the guns and men of the Fort Pickens Army Post. By far the largest and most impressive of the old structures is Fort Pickens itself, a massive 19th century masonry fortification known chiefly as a Federal strong point during the Civil War. But while the old fort became obsolete shortly after that war, the fort area continued as an active military sub-post of nearby Fort Barrancas throughout the Second World War. During the eighty-odd years between the Civil War and the departure of the last soldier in 1947, only the 18 month stay of Geronimo and a small band of Apache prisoners from 1886 to 1888 broke the routine of the coast artillery post. When the Army departed, the area settled quietly into the role of a state park.

Since 1971 the Fort Pickens area has been administered by the National Park Service as a part of Gulf Islands National Seashore. One of the services provided by the National Park Service is the interpretation of the area's history providing information for park visitors on the background and uses of the various structures. Much of the early efforts of Park Service historians concentrated on the 19th century fort, about which a great deal of material has been obtained. More recently

efforts have shifted toward filling the gaps in the later military history of the site.

The primary source for information on the ten concrete batteries built in the Fort Pickens Area between 1894 and 1942 has been the National Park Service Historic Structure Report written by Edwin C. Bearss, Pensacola Harbor Defense Project: 1890 to 1947 (Denver: National Park Service, 1978). This report concentrates on the construction histories of the batteries, giving very little information on the manner in which the structures were actually used. Naturally enough, once park visitors began to learn a little about these enigmatic blocks of concrete, they wanted to know more about their uses. Unfortunately, National Park Service historians soon discovered that there were no extant descriptions of routine activities at peacetime Coast Artillery posts. The Coast Artillery branch of the Army was discontinued in 1950, so there were no contemporary examples for reference. It seemed that this information was simply lost to history. Yet it soon became apparent that the information was actually available, just uncollected. Many of the men who served in the Coast Artillery at Pensacola are still alive, carrying around in their memories information available no where else. It is the pursuit of this elusive information which led to the foundation of the Fort Barrancas Oral History Project in 1984.

Soon after Gulf Islands National Seashore opened, National Park Service field personnel began to encounter some of these men as they revisited the scenes of their military experiences. Park personnel learned that veterans of the 13th Coast Artillery Regiment, which had been headquartered at Fort Barrancas near Pensacola, were holding annual reunions. When these veterans met in Pensacola, National Park Service rangers were there with questionnaires and a tape recorder.

Since that first meeting the project has continued intermittently, with some interviews being conducted in private homes and at National Park Service offices. The project has been hampered by the absence of an independent staff and budget, being pursued as merely one facet of the many duties assigned to the Interpretive staff. Yet, the project was revived in the summer of 1987 in preparation for the 13th Coast Artillery convention scheduled for October in Pensacola. At the convention National Park Service personnel were once again present with tape recorder in hand, and several more interviews were taped. This process was repeated at the 1988 meeting in Galveston, Texas. A total of thirty-eight interviews have been recorded, varying in length from a few minutes to an hour or more. What follows is a preliminary report based on the information gathered from these interviews.

Fort Barrancas was the primary Army facility on the central

Gulf Coast, located near Pensacola on the mainland opposite Fort Pickens and adjacent to the Pensacola Navy Yard. This post had grown from origins as a small 19th century fort (now restored and maintained as another part of Gulf Islands National Seashore) into a large artillery training center by the 1930s. The headquarters and main barracks buildings of the regiment were in this mainland reservation, now a part of the Pensacola Naval Air Station. The gun batteries, along with a few quarters and support buildings, were located on the two islands which form the entrance to the bay, ten out of the total of thirteen batteries being found around Fort Pickens. The ten batteries in the Fort Pickens Area were built between 1894 and 1942. In the period covered by our interviews, roughly 1930 to 1947, the active emplacements were: Batteries Cullum and Sevier (10" rifled guns); Battery GPF (155 mm guns); Batteries Trueman and Payne (3" guns); Battery AMTB (90 mm); Battery Fixed (3"); Battery Air (90 mm AA); Battery Langdon (12" guns); and Battery Worth (12" mortars). Batteries GPF, AMTB, Fixed, and Air were open emplacements without the massive concrete bunkers, although physical evidence of gun mounts, magazines, and latrines remain to help pinpoint their locations. Aerial photographs from 1942 show numerous temporary structures among the batteries, along with a railroad and road network connecting the various areas. All of these were evidence of significant activity in the Fort Pickens Area, activity about which very little was known.[1]

Although the Fort Pickens sub-post is the area of major interest to the National Park Service, its history is so integrally linked to the other areas of the post that the project questionnaire was designed to obtain as much information as possible about general Army activities in the Pensacola area. Interviewees were asked to fill out a brief biographical sketch, and were then asked a series of questions from an outline in an effort to obtain uniformity to aid in cross-referencing. Interviewers were National Park Service personnel with backgrounds in history, armed with aerial photographs, military diagrams of the post area, and Mr. Bearss' historic structure report. Interviewers were given latitude to tailor questions to the duty of the interviewee, or to ask follow-up questions.

Welcome to Fort Barrancas

Interviews began by asking the interviewees to describe how they joined the Army, and how they came to be in the Coast Artillery. As the period covered included both prewar and war years, this question elicited a variety of responses. Most of those interviewed were draftees, but several had sought out the Army as a steady job during the Depression. For William A. Mole, the Artillery at Fort Barrancas had the only opening when he signed up in May of 1930; he neither knew nor cared what the assignment meant. A similar situation

confronted Winston Crosby when he wanted to join in the summer of 1938; the only open position was in the regimental band at Fort Barrancas. Yet joining the Army was not that simple for Crosby, as he had to pay his own way to Pensacola for an audition before he was accepted. In those days the size of the military was strictly limited; you couldn't join the Army until someone else got out. A few men actively sought positions in the Coast Artillery. Richard D. Olney, Sr., came from a "military family," and knew that "Seacoast Artillery was choice duty." Having visited Fort Barrancas as a cadet at the Citadel, he knew exactly where he wanted to be stationed.[2]

In fact a large number of men had an opportunity to become familiar with Fort Barrancas and the Coast Artillery without joining the Army. Aside form the group which Richard Olney accompanied, ROTC students from the University of Alabama, Georgia Tech, and Mississippi State College also regularly visited the post for summer training camps. Other groups of young men who trained at the post during summer months included National Guard units as well as the Civilian Military Training Camps. The CMTC program was created in 1920 for men aged 17 to 29 as a combination of citizenship and military training. Upon completion of the series of four camps a man was qualified as a second lieutenant in the Officers' Reserve Corps. This was how Oscar W. Medley first came to the post in 1930 as a youth of only 16 (he lied about his age). He returned each year for the

30-day camps, completing the courses of Basic, Red, White, and Blue camps with a recommendation for a commission. The lack of a trigonometry credit doomed his commission, but he joined the Army anyway in 1936.[3]

The sight which greeted the men upon arrival at Fort Barrancas left an indelible impression on their minds. Situated on a natural rise overlooking the blue waters of Pensacola Bay, the post area was beautiful. Every person interviewed to date has commented on the beauty of the post area. Descriptions range from "country club" to "college campus," testimony to the efforts begun by the post commander in 1937. By 1939, "graded drives, flowering shrubs, gardens, Bermuda grass, and a new coat of paint for the quarters completed a much needed face-lifting," according to the newspaper of the neighboring naval base.[4]

Apparently a part of these beautification efforts involved salvaging materials from the old fort on Santa Rosa Island. William Mole remembers bringing back many a brick or cannonball on the boat ride from the island to the mainland. "Everyone brought back one cannonball or two bricks, or you didn't get on the boat. You might have to dig a little bit (to find them), but cannonballs were all over. The patio behind 'B' barracks was built with these bricks." The cannonballs were stacked in neat pyramids for decoration.[5]

Highlighting the post area was the new enlisted men's barracks, a two- story masonry structure with white walls and a red tile roof. Known to the men of the 13th Coast Artillery as the "White House," this building is currently home to the U.S. Naval Schools of Photography. In the 1940s it was home to Batteries A, B, and C of the 13th Coast Artillery Regiment, the units which comprised the bulk of the 510 officers and men of the peacetime garrison of Fort Barrancas. Completed in 1939, this building was billed as the most modern barracks in the Army. Its steam-heating system was quite an experience for some of the men with rural backgrounds.[6]

Other units which made up the post garrison included the Headquarters and Headquarters Battery, detachments for medical, finance, quartermaster, and ordnance services, and the regimental band. These units were housed in separate wooden quarters which used coal-burning stoves for heat. Three more batteries which completed the organizational structure of the 13th Coast Artillery Regiment were stationed at Fort Moultrie, South Carolina; Key West, Florida; and Fort Crockett, Texas. Still other batteries would be created with the wartime build up, and at Fort Barrancas these men were housed in a combination of temporary wooden barracks, tar paper houses, and even tents. Many of these facilities had been erected for use by the groups training at the post during the summer camps, as a consequence of which they had no insulation for the winter

months. Compared to these quarters, the "White House" must have indeed seemed like the lap of luxury.[7]

Only a few soldiers were stationed at the Fort Pickens sub-post before the United States entered the Second World War. These men, some with families, lived in wooden barracks built in the first quarter of this century. Several of these buildings are still in use as offices and quarters for National Park Service personnel. Wartime expansion brought a host of temporary barracks to the island, ranging from tents to flimsy wooden structures with canvas shutters for windows. These were removed by the Army before 1947, and very little evidence of this activity remains, aside from some aerial photographs.[8]

Mrs. Mille E. Williamson lived on the island for several years with her husband Stanmore, a machinist who divided his time between repairing the guns and standing guard over them. Mrs. Williamson remembers living "the life of Riley" at the Fort Pickens sub-post. Her husband was able to come home for lunch, and he had holidays off unless there was a firing practice. She put out her grocery order on the back porch in the afternoon, and it would be delivered with fresh bread everyday at 11:00. Mrs. Williamson raised four children while living on the island, which she describes as a perfect place, since the Army kept the children away from the batteries, and there was nothing else to "get into." She seldom availed

herself of the opportunity to visit the mainland, which seemed "a hundred miles" away, although her children took the boat ride to attend school. It took a world war to get the Williamsons to move away from Fort Pickens and Santa Rosa Island.[9]

Life at the Post

Peacetime allowed a regular schedule of training and duties. The men received basic training in small arms and parade formations at Fort Barrancas, then went to the island for training on the artillery pieces. For most men the day began at 5:30, with breakfast at 6. After breakfast came a little time for policing the barracks area and then the men received their duty assignments for the day.

But before the men were given their duty assignment every man had the opportunity to escape from the routine. The Army encouraged its men to present a smart appearance, and to this end the men were subjected to daily inspections. As an incentive for men who might otherwise give only minimal attention to the standards of military dress and bearing, the man with the best appearance at the morning inspection was selected as "Orderly of the Guard." The individual so designated was charged with keeping tabs on the guard detail for that day, making sure that all officers approaching the

guardhouse were properly saluted. Upon spying an approaching officer, the orderly would call out, "turn out the guard!" Once the salute was returned, the orderly would announce, "never mind the guard!" The real reward for this duty came in the form of a 24-hour pass for the following day. With the prospect of a day of light duty followed by a day off, the competition at morning inspections was probably quite keen.[10]

The schedule for a typical week in the 1930s might see infantry and close-order drill on Monday morning, followed by an afternoon of fatigue duty. On Tuesday the day would be spent drilling at the batteries on Santa Rosa Island. Wednesday morning might include organized athletics, such as baseball, basketball, or bowling, and the men had the afternoon off. Thursday was another day of training, perhaps devoted to chemical warfare training in which men would enter a chamber filled with a diluted toxic gas and only then be allowed to don the protective mask. This not only simulated realistic conditions for gas attacks but also taught men to identify different substances by their distinctive odors. Friday would be spent preparing for the next day's full-dress inspections, a drill sometimes called the "G.I. Party." Saturday mornings always saw the full post complement on the parade ground for inspection, after which the afternoon and all of Sunday were left free for the soldiers' personal needs. It was not a strenuous schedule, and the post had the relaxed atmosphere of

a large family doing a routine job. Much like any organization which must be ready for rapid mobilization in an emergency, both men and equipment underwent constant training and maintenance at Fort Barrancas and its sub-posts to insure readiness should their services be required.[11]

Working the Guns

The primary service required of the 13th Coast Artillery at Fort Barrancas was, of course, to man the batteries guarding the entrance to Pensacola Bay, most of which were on Santa Rosa Island. To get the men to the island, the Army operated a small fleet of boats including at various times a small ferry, a minelayer, and a tug which doubled as a tow for target floats used in firing practices. It was about a ten minute ride from the mainland to the island.

Once on the island, units assigned to outlying emplacements boarded a narrow-gauge railroad for transportation. Completed with a "golden spike" in 1931, the tracks stretched from Fort Pickens to Battery Langdon, three miles to the east. Much of the old roadbed now serves as a bicycle path in the park. This picturesque mode of travel often led to interesting moments remembered by the veterans of the 13th Coast Artillery. The train was stored in a little red building, and made two trips a day down the island, except Sundays. As one man remembered it,

the open cars made the trip a very cold one in winter. But even a cold ride was better than none at all. John Keith recalled that the sergeant in charge of the train would occasionally refuse to make a special trip, if he didn't like you. The only alternative was to walk the mile or two to the batteries, through soft sand.[12]

What all the mainland training and the transportation network led up to was the complicated and dangerous task of operating several varieties of heavy artillery designed to hit moving targets. The largest of these weapons were the 12" guns of Battery Langdon, located approximately three miles east of old Fort Pickens. These huge cannon fired a projectile one foot in diameter, weighing 975 lbs., to a maximum range of almost seventeen miles. The basic propelling charge for these guns consisted of 40 lbs. of nitrocellulose powder packed in a silk bag. Silk is still used for cartridge bags as it burns completely, leaving very little residue in the gun. For additional range, the powder charge could be increased to as much as 46 lbs. by the addition of fast-burning powder-boosters known as "increments." One of the more unusual bits of information uncovered to date concerns the storage of this ammunition at Battery Langdon.[13]

Inside the powder magazine at this battery, the walls are marked with a painted red line running around the room at a

height of about four feet from the floor. This line marks the highest water level resulting from a hurricane which struck Pensacola in September of 1926. Although the presence of this high-water mark was well-known to National Park Service personnel, it was not known why the Army had chosen to record this instance of natural forces overwhelming the coast defenses. As always, the Army had a very practical reason for wanting to know the level of water intrusion into the magazine. Ammunition stored in the battery had to be stacked in racks above this line to minimize damage in the event of another hurricane. Given the number of such storms which threaten the Gulf Coast every year, this seems to have been a sound precaution.[14]

Another feature of the powder magazines which had long gone unexplained were exhaust fans vented through the roof. These were found on the larger batteries, but not on the batteries which held guns of smaller caliber. The answer to this mystery stems from the practice of packing the powder cartridges for large guns in sealed drums filled with ether. The ether was to keep moisture-laden air from the powder. The vents and fans were meant to draw the ether out of the magazine once the drums were opened. Not only does this explain the presence of the exhaust vents, it was not generally known that ether was used in this manner. The reason for the absence of vents at the other emplacements was that the projectile and propellant for

smaller guns came as one unit, much like a large bullet. With the powder tightly sealed within a brass shell-casing, there was little danger of moisture contaminating this ammunition.[15]

The process of loading and firing the huge artillery pieces at Battery Langdon was a complicated procedure requiring coordinated actions of a highly- trained gun crew. The size of the gun crew varied from twelve men on the 3" guns to twenty or more for the larger weapons. A "crack" crew performed a martial ballet on the gun platform, with each man following carefully choreographed functions in time with the others. One or two men would adjust the gun using coordinates telephoned from the range section. Another man would open the breech-block and keep it clear of the barrel, while another group would bring the projectile up from the magazine. For the guns with the heaviest projectiles, those of 6-inch or greater bores, the shells were brought to the breech on wheeled carts equipped with brakes. As the shell detail ran their cart up to the weapon, the ramming detail would follow with their long pole resting against the shell. When the shell-cart reached the weapon, the brakes were applied. At the same moment, the ramming detail would throw their weight against the shell, using the cart's momentum to help ram the projectile tightly into the barrel. The object of this effort was a brass ring on the shell, about three inches wide, and about 1/2 inch larger than the diameter of the barrel. This ring locked the

projectile into the rifling grooves in the barrel, preventing the propellant from escaping around the shell, and insuring the proper spin as the shell traveled up the barrel.

With the shell firmly in place, two more men would be at hand with the powder charge, cradled on a wooden tray, which was quickly slid into the breech. With all of this done in a matter of seconds, the number one man on the crew would slam the breechblock and lock it in place. A small primer charge, much like a shotgun shell, would be inserted into the block, and the weapon was now ready for firing.[16]

At peak efficiency, this entire operation could be accomplished in about thirty seconds. The dangers involved in such operations should be readily apparent. With so many men doing so many things so quickly, the slightest error in timing could cause serious injuries, even death. It is to the credit of the men and their training that very few accidents occurred.

One of the problems which did occur involved the ammunition cart. Now and then an inexperienced or over-eager crewman would apply the brakes a little too soon, causing the projectile to miss the breach of the gun. This type of accident was particularly dangerous with the older guns at Batteries Cullum and Sevier. These guns were mounted over pits, in which crewmen responsible for rotating and elevating

the weapon were stationed. The possibility of a several-hundred-pound projectile dropping into the pit was just one of the hazards these men faced.[17]

One man recalled an incident illustrating a different type of hazard, brought about by the swiftness of the loading operations. In order to maximize the rate of fire, the crew with the shell and powder charge for the following round would time their approach to coincide with the opening of the breechblock. On this occasion, the propellant from the previous round had not burned evenly, and was still burning when the breechblock swung open. This resulted in a "backflash," as the powder residue flared from the rear of the weapon, inundating the men approaching with the next round. Two of these men were cradling about forty pounds of powder when they were struck by the backflash, and the next powder detail was only a few yards away with another deadly charge. Had either of the powder bags been ignited by the backflash, the results would have been catastrophic. As it happened the danger passed in the blink of an eye, leaving only first-degree burns and singed clothing to mark this brush with death.[18]

The men of the Coast Artillery took the dangers of working with high explosives and heavy machinery with characteristic good humor. An example of this involves the nicknames bestowed on one of the gunnery sergeants at the post. Sergeant Greenwell

had been named "Goose" because of his habit of quickly ducking his head to peer up the breech of his gun to insure that the shell and powder had been properly placed. This slightly eccentric behavior carried-over to practice sessions, even when no shells were actually loaded. On one such occasion, Sergeant Greenwell failed to get out of the way before the breechblock was swung into the breech. The sergeant sustained a fractured skull for his trouble, and was ever after known to all as "Breechblock" Greenwell.[19]

One of the common hazards shared by all on the gun crews came every time the weapons were fired. Being in close proximity to forty pounds of exploding powder meant that the men were subjected to tremendous concussive effects and noise. To withstand the powerful concussion, men were taught to stand with their backs to the guns while standing on tip-toe and holding their breath. This position tightened abdominal muscles to prevent internal injuries, and also lessened the chances of being knocked breathless. It was not uncommon to have seams in pants ripped open by repeated firings. For ear protection the men were issued cotton, but it was seldom used since it interfered with hearing commands as well. Hearing problems were so common that the condition was known as "artilleryman's ear."[20]

When Langdon's guns went into action the vibrations could be

felt all the way to Pensacola across the bay. McHenry Harry recalled the first time he pulled the lanyard, the cord which activated the firing mechanism: "It felt like the world was ending." His hat blew off, his pants were split, and he could see the concussion rippling through the sand. Mille Williamson particularly enjoyed the brilliant flashes of night firings. She kept the children inside on firing days, and the house would shake with each round.[21]

Operations on the smaller artillery pieces followed a similar procedure, the primary difference being that the crew and projectile were both smaller and easier to handle. Another difference was in the frequency of misfires and hangfires, which occurred more often on the smaller-caliber weapons. (When the primer failed to fire, this was called a "misfire;" when the primer fired and the powder did not, this was called a "hangfire.") A misfire was no problem. A new primer would be inserted and the firing would continue. A hangfire was a different story. There would be a waiting period of approximately ten minutes, and then the breech would be opened and a bucket of water would be thrown into the bore to extinguish any lingering sparks. It was a nerve- wracking procedure.[22]

After the weapon had been allowed to sit for some time, a volunteer (usually a gunnery sergeant) would approach the gun

and gently open the breech. A bucket of fire retardant would be placed under the breech, and the projectile would be pulled out of the chamber and into the bucket. With the 3-inch rapid-fire guns this was a fairly simple task, as the projectiles slid easily from the chamber. The 155 mm guns of Battery GPF were another matter. These projectiles, like those of the larger weapons, were tightly rammed into rifling grooves in the barrel. The only way to remove them was to place a ramrod into the barrel from the muzzle, and then tap on the nose of the projectile. A civilian ordnance expert would consult with the battery commander, the commanding officer, and the gunnery sergeant assigned to the particular gun before this dangerous task was undertaken. Since the rifling grooves describe a gradual twist up the barrel of the gun, the projectile had to be gradually backed-out. While it might seem that banging on the end of a high explosive shell might be unduly hazardous, a few details made it somewhat safer. The ramrod was equipped with a bell-shaped end to fit over the projectile point. The projectiles were armor-piercing, with hardened steel tips, and were "armed" by inertial fuses. This meant that they would explode only after several revolutions, caused by the rifling in the barrel. One man opined that it was actually more hazardous to be the one catching the shell after it was pushed out. The real danger came from the possibility of a "cook-off." If the barrel was hot from firing, that alone could cause the powder to ignite, and the

danger increased with the length of time that the shell was in the barrel.[23]

Supporting Units

A less dangerous but no less important task performed by men of the Coast Artillery centered on the problem of accurately aiming the guns to hit moving targets at great distances. The solution to this problem was based on the principle of triangulation, in which observations from two positions are tabulated to determine a third location. These positions were known as "base end stations," and each gun emplacement had one of these base end stations on either side, at a distance of several hundred yards from the battery.

Inside these base end stations were three men and several instruments: azimuth equipment for determining the precise angle of an observed target from the known position of the base end station; a telephone linked to the other base end station and to the battery; and the T.I. bell. This last instrument was the "time interval" bell, which rang at twenty-second intervals. Its purpose was to insure coordinated observations within a specific time frame, an important element in determining the speed of a moving target. When the angles of observation from the two stations were plotted on the board, the point where the lines crossed marked the target. This

triangulation was only the first step, however. Since the object of this exercise was to hit a moving target, the guns had to be aimed at a predicted point where the target would be after allowing for the time it would take for the projectile to get there. This time of flight was subject to many variables, including the predicted muzzle velocity (which itself varied with the temperature of the powder, and from lot to lot even when all other variables were equal), the humidity, wind speed and direction, and differences in elevation between the gun and target. These variables were figured in the plotting room, and the results were given to the gun crew in the form of "azimuth" and "elevation." (Azimuth corresponded to the horizontal movement of the gun, elevation to the vertical.) Taking all these variables into consideration (and several others not mentioned), accurate firing relied on "ranging shots." This is to say that all of the above would only get you into the neighborhood of the target. The first shots would either fall long or short; that is, the range was seldom exact. The elevation of the gun would be adjusted from visual observation of the splash caused by the projectile until both a "long" and a "short" were recorded. Once the target was thus "bracketed," the guns would be "fired for effect."[24]

To provide illumination for a night attack, seven huge searchlights were distributed among the batteries along the islands. One other searchlight was added during World War II,

bringing the total on Santa Rosa Island to five. These were 60-inch lights, mounted on 60-foot steel towers with concrete foundations. These towers were equipped with a counterweight and pivot which allowed the lights to be lowered into protective housings when not in use. The foundations and counterweights are still in evidence at the Fort Pickens Area. The maintenance and operation of these lights fell to the men of Battery "K." Due to the nocturnal nature of this work, the Battery K breakroom became a popular spot with men from other batteries who managed to find some free time during the day. There was always something going on at Battery K.[25]

Yet still more information was needed to obtain accuracy in firings. A meteorological station on the island would phone in data on wind velocity and temperature, which would then be compared to ideal conditions listed on a firing table in order to determine necessary corrections. This station was jointly-manned by Army and Navy personnel, as the information was also needed for navigation and flight operations. Further corrections would be made based on the temperature of the gunpowder, as this varied the propelling force of the powder. Finally, the gunnery officer would make adjustments to correct for peculiarities of the gun itself. Imperfections in the bore of the barrel gave each weapon a personality of its own, with some firing high or low, or slightly off to one side. An officer familiar with his weapon could compute all of these

details to score a hit on a distant target, but only if the information from every step along the way was precise and accurate. A Coast Artillery battery was truly greater than the sum of its parts.[26]

Supporting the men who worked at the batteries and in the range section were many others who performed myriad tasks which allowed the Coast Artillery to function as a relatively self-contained community. As the post garrison grew with the addition of Selective Service men after September of 1940, these supporting units were reorganized and expanded. By the end of 1940 the garrison had tripled in size to include 40 officers and 1,500 men.[27]

One of these support units was the Medical Detachment, formed with 32 men taken from the station hospital on March 1, 1941. These men were stationed at Fort Pickens, divided between a dispensary at the old fort area and a field unit at Battery Cooper about a mile to the east. These men treated minor injuries and ailments not requiring hospitalization. In addition, a medic was stationed at each gun during exercises to provide immediate care in the event of an accident.[28]

No less important to the men were services provided by men such as Vondi Cetorelli and Cecil Dennis. Cetorelli made mail deliveries twice daily during the week. As has been the lot of

messengers throughout history, these men occasionally suffered for their duty. "Guys got mad if you didn't bring 'em letters." In self-defense, Mr. Cetorelli would sometimes write letters himself just to assuage neglected egos of homesick soldiers. The men who worked with Cecil Dennis started their days at 4 a.m., working in modern stainless steel kitchens to feed the men of the post. Surviving menus as well as the comments of their fellow veterans attest to the skill which the cooks applied to their task. There were eight to ten cooks for each battery of 150 to 200 men. Food for those stationed at Fort Pickens was prepared on the mainland, loaded onto trucks in cans, and driven onto the ferry for the ride out to the island. In spite of the best efforts of these men, in winter months the food often arrived cold.[29]

The trucks which delivered food to sub-posts, as well as all other wheeled vehicles used by the regiment, were maintained and operated by the Motor Pool. These men convoyed detachments to other bases across the south, including one battery which was sent to the mouth of the Mississippi River to watch for U-boats after the outbreak of war. This duty could entail unusual hazards as well. The Fort McRee sub-post was located on an island across the entrance channel to the bay from Fort Pickens. At low tide this island could be reached by a narrow causeway from the mainland, and one driver vividly recalls a time when the rising tide almost caught him and his two-ton

truck as he made this precarious passage. Among the more pleasant duties was the run into Pensacola on Friday nights, where local women would await at the San Carlos Hotel for a ride to the dances held at the post.[30]

To provide the necessary paperwork which kept all of these activities going with some semblance of order was the duty of the battery clerks. Although assigned to the individual batteries, these men worked out of the Headquarters Battery, processing the forms and files maintained on each soldier. Although these men were subject to the strains associated with office work, they generally worked a regular week of 8 to 5, Monday through Friday, and were excepted from drill formations. Not being combat personnel, it was often easier for these men to obtain passes to go into Pensacola. Some of these men were required to stand guard for a four-hour shift every other night, but it was relatively easy duty. At least one man actively sought this duty after what he describes as "some close calls" with the big guns on the island.[31]

Off-Duty Activities

The military has long recognized that well-rounded soldiers require rest and recreation to relieve the tensions of work and the dulling effects of routines. Fort Barrancas Army Post included a bowling alley and a baseball diamond, as well as

basketball and tennis courts, all of which were used for organized competitions. An air-conditioned movie theater provided first-run movies five nights a week. The theater was open to both Army and Navy personnel for the price of 15 cents a ticket, but the last five rows were reserved for the exclusive use of soldiers. Being the only air-conditioned building on the post, it was always filled to capacity in the warmer months. A theater was later built at Fort Pickens for troops stationed on the island during the war. Rounding out the recreational opportunities were concerts given every Thursday night by the regimental band, and with the outbreak of war, the USO sponsored dances on Fridays.[32]

1941 brought still another feature to the post which falls into the category of recreation, a post newsletter called the Barrancas Breeze. This project was the brainchild of George Grow, who had worked as an emcee for the dance marathons which were popular during the Depression era. Grow frankly admits that the idea came to him one night when he was looking for a way to escape from his regular duties. Slipping into an office with a typewriter, he wrote a few stories about post activities with personal notes on some of the men, which he gave to the post commander the next day. The Barrancas Breeze became a weekly publication with a small staff of three editors and a photographer, supplemented by reporters in every unit. An effort was made to mention everyone on the post by name in at

least one issue, so that soldiers could send something home to the folks.[33]

This project was such a success that Grow was assigned to a new Public Relations Department at the post. This unit sponsored many programs designed to improve relations with the nearby civilian population. One such program brought Richard Olney to the city hall in Pensacola to demonstrate chemical warfare procedures. Another outgrowth was a radio program conducted by Grow out of the studios of WCOA on the seventh floor of the San Carlos Hotel. This program included music as well as comic skits about life at the post. Units were referred to by nicknames to avoid broadcasting information which might be picked up by spies or submarines offshore. It was during one of these shows that Grow noticed the station's teletype printer suddenly rattling out a message on a quiet Sunday morning early in December of 1941. Taking the message from the machine, he returned to his desk to select the next record. Since it was a news bulletin, he read the announcement over the air that the U.S. Naval Base at Pearl Harbor had been attacked by Japanese forces. Since he, like many Americans, did not know where or what Pearl Harbor was, the true import of this message did not immediately sink in. Within a few moments however, Grow received a telephone call from the commanding officer of the 13th Coast Artillery at Fort Barrancas, Colonel A. V. Rinearson. Since privates were not accustomed to speaking directly to such

a ranking officer, his attention was now fully aroused. The colonel dictated a statement to be read over the air directing all officers and men to report immediately to the post. Grow read the message back to the colonel, and then read it into the microphone. A few moments later, he realized that this order applied to him as well. A civilian employee of the station who had been listening arrived shortly to relieve Grow, who had been alone at the station, and after a quick drink at the bar he caught a ride to the post. America was now at war.[34]

War Brings Changes

The coming of war brought an end to the easy routines of the peacetime post, at least in the beginning. It was now that families were moved off of the Fort Pickens Area, to be replaced by several batteries transferred from the mainland. While temporary quarters were being constructed, these men lived in tents on the wind-swept island. Christmas held no cheer for those men that year, eating their dinners out of mess kits as a chilling rain drenched their tents. Some of the men from the 13th Coast Artillery had been transferred to the Philippines shortly before, and concern for these men mounted as word arrived of Japanese victories there.[35]

Now the gun batteries would be manned around-the-clock, and an officer able to fire the guns was on-duty at all times. Guard

duty now became more than simply tedious. As one man recalls:

You'd march around the perimeter by yourself ... you'd take the train down and stand guard for three or four hours at a stretch you'd hear something movin' and you couldn't tell if it was a German off of a U-boat or not.[36]

Another man remembered the bitter cold of walking perimeter on the low-lying barrier island, "...the coldest place I ever seen in January."[37]

The heightened tensions also made riding the train a more dangerous proposition, as related by Richard Olney:

... We only had about five guards on the island, and they were quite some distance apart. And as Officer of the Day, I would get on the train, and operate the narrow-gauge train myself. Everybody who wanted to go down the island during off-duty hours had to learn how to operate the train. It was a gasoline engine, or maybe a diesel, gasoline engine as I recall ... You started it up, and it went up and down the island, back and forth. We had a similar railroad at Fortress Monroe which we called the 'B&F Railroad,' for back and forth ...

... When you would go out and check the guard, you'd get on the train and roll down the track ... the engine had a

deadman control on it, so if you let go of the throttle, the weight of it would pull it down and shut off the engine, and the train would coast to a stop ... sentries knew that when anyone came to them, they had to challenge ... the challenge was, 'halt who's there?,' not 'who goes there.' ... The sentry would have his gun with shells in the magazine, but not in firing order. The sentry would challenge ... and if he didn't get a satisfactory answer, he would cock his rifle and put a shell in firing position and call out a second time, 'halt, who's there?' ... And if he doesn't get a satisfactory answer the second time, he calls out ... again, and fires...

I'm telling you this because ... I was going down to Battery Cooper ... at night ... I was O.D. and I'm ridin' the train ... the only one on the train, and as I'm comin' down the train was makin' some noise, and I gave hell to this sentry ... and he was scared, he was skittish, he was new, I know. And he calls out, 'halt, who's there?' And I call out, 'Officer of the Day!' Well, apparently he didn't hear me, because the next thing I heard him say was (with a quavering voice) ... 'halt, who's there?' ... and I heard this gun go, 'click, click.' And I call out, 'Officer of the Day!,' and I roll off the train, into the sand, and the train kept on comin' ... the sentry calls out ... and he's pointin' his gun at the train, and I'm on the ground about a hundred yards down the track, and gettin' up very quietly, and waitin' for the sentry to follow the train

on down the track. And finally I get up close to him, and said, 'Officer of the Day.' He swung around with his gun, and I reached up and grabbed the damn gun and held on to it, and he and I were scared to death, 'cause I could've sworn this poor boy was goin' to shoot me, but he didn't.... These were draftees ... we had a lot of draftees at Fort Barrancas.[38]

The End of an Era

Tensions began to ease at Fort Barrancas Army Post in late 1942, as the tide of war began to turn in favor of the Allies. U-boat activity along the Gulf Coast declined dramatically and the threat of invasion was no longer a serious consideration. While maintaining a vigilant posture, the emphasis shifted back to the role of training artillery units for service overseas. There was a constant turnover of personnel as trainees were run through the schools and shipped out. Old hands would play jokes on the trainees, such as telling them that they were being shipped directly overseas, when in fact they were boarding the boats bound for Fort Pickens.[39]

The Fort Pickens Area served as a check point for coastal convoys, and the tower atop the mortar emplacement at Battery Worth served as Harbor Entrance Control Post and Harbor Defense Command Post, "the nerve center for joint Army-Navy defense of the vital Pensacola area." Liberty ships and destroyers came

and went frequently through the shipping channel, occasionally running aground in the narrow passage or scaring off idle soldiers fishing at choice spots near the channel. One man recalled seeing a tugboat lose control of two barges while running against the outgoing tide. The barges "jack- knifed," smashing the tug to pieces. But the violence of war was far away, and some men became so bored that they volunteered for infantry duty just to escape from the routine of the training camp.[40]

The end of World War II also marked the end of the era of Coast Artillery. Advances in weapon technology represented by the German V-2 ballistic missile and the atomic bomb, along with lessons learned in numerous Allied invasions against fixed coast artillery defenses, proved the obsolescence of massive batteries in concrete bunkers. Following the war many Coast Artillery posts were declared surplus and phased out. By 1950 the Coast Artillery would be reorganized and integrated into the Field Artillery. Fort Barrancas was deactivated in June of 1947. All of the guns and equipment had been removed by late 1946, with equipment going to other bases and the guns being scrapped by a civilian firm. Commissary stores were shipped to nearby Eglin Air Force Base.[41]

One of the last soldiers to leave the post was John Keith. He had worked as a civilian employee at Fort Barrancas before the

war, running a warehouse for a contractor working on another technological advance of the war years, radar. Wartime had not changed his job, only his salary; drafted, he was returned to his old job, but as a private. In 1947, Keith was one of ten enlisted men who, with five officers, formed the shutdown crew. Each man had his own vehicle, and they would take turns acting as guards to check the trunks of departing vehicles for misplaced government property. As the last of the files were being boxed for shipment, Keith recalls finding a letter from the commandant of the Navy Base to the Army commander, complaining of "rowdies" from the post disturbing the residents of nearby Warrington and including the opinion that "any self-respecting person should be in bed by 9 o'clock." Clearly, America had indeed entered a new era, and the passing of the Coast Artillery would be only one of a host of changes in the postwar world.[42]

Forty years after the closing of Fort Barrancas Army Post and its sub posts at Forts Pickens and McRee, the forlorn remains of the emplacements which once guarded our coasts and occasionally shook the earth with their massive guns stand as mute reminders of a past-age. It was a time when huge artillery pieces were the most devastating weapons known to man, when the Coast Artillery was the pride of the Army. Now, with the memories of these veterans of the 13th Coast Artillery Regiment, these batteries can once more speak.

Notes

[1]Batteries not named for individuals were designated according to function: GPF was a French designation for a concentrated field battery, a remnant of World War I service; Air indicated multiple-use weapons used for antiaircraft purposes; Fixed was opposed to mobile; AMTB indicated anti-motor torpedo boat. Edwin C. Bearss, Pensacola Harbor Defense Project, 1890-1947 (Denver: United States National Park Service, 1978), passim.

[2]Interview with William A. Mole, Plotter, 13th Coast Artillery, 1939-1941, 13 October 1984; Interview with Winston Crosby, Musician, 13th Coast Artillery Regimental Band, 1938-1945, 2 October 1987; Interview with Richard D. Olney, Officer, 13th Coast Artillery, 1940-1944, 2 January 1985.

[3]Gosport, September 1939, p. 10; Pensacola Journal, 6 April 1936, p. 8; Interview with Oscar W. Medley, Gunnery Sergeant, 13th Coast Artillery, 1936-1942, 12 October 1984.

[4]Interview with Jerry Abbenante, Driver, 13th Coast Artillery Motor Pool, 1941-1943, 1 October 1987; Interview with Fred H. Simmons, Supply Officer, 13th Coast Artillery, 1944-1946, 12 October 1985; Gosport, September 1939, p. 9.

[5]Mole.

[6]Florida Municipal Record, vol. 11, no. 7 (November 1938): 22, 50; Mole.

[7]"Organization Day Address," History Files, Gulf Islands National Seashore, Florida Unit, ND-133.

[8]Photographic Files, Gulf Islands National Seashore, Florida Unit, 1942-8 through 1942-20.

[9]Interview with Mille E. Williamson, Housewife, Fort Pickens Subpost, 1933-1942, 4 July 1987.

[10]Interview with James E. Hollihand, Plotter, 13th Coast Artillery, 1932-1935 and 1938-1940, 13 July 1987; Medley.

[11]Olney; Mole.

[12]Pensacola Journal, 8 March 1931, p. 1; Medley; Interview with Earl Larabee, Plotter, 13th Coast Artillery, 1942-1947, 20 July 1987; Interview with John Keith, Sergeant Major, 13th Coast Artillery, 1943-1947, 10 August 1987.

[13]Emanuel Raymond Lewis, Seacoast Defenses of the United States: An Introductory History (Washington: Smithsonian Press, 1970; reprint ed., Annapolis: Leeward Publications, Inc., 1979), p. 142; Hollihand.

[14]Hollihand.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Medley; Hollihand; Olney; Interview with Lynn H. Webb, Battery Commander, 13th Coast Artillery, 1942-1945, 3 October 1987; Interview with James E. Peoples, Gunner, 13th Coast Artillery, 1942-1943, 3 October 1987.

[17]Hollihand.

[18]Webb.

[19]Hollihand.

[20]Interview with John A. Chandler, Gunner Sergeant, 13th Coast Artillery, 1940-1944, 2 October 1987; Hollihand.

[21]Interview with McHenry Harry, Gunner, 13th Coast Artillery, 1937-1940, 3 August 1987; Williamson.

[22]Webb; conversation with Russell H. McGehee, Gun Commander, 13th Coast Artillery, 1941-1945, 8 October 1988.

[23]Webb; McGehee; Letter, Thomas A. Dorrough to author, 16 October 1988.

[24]Interview with Herman E. Nall, Instructor, 13th Coast Artillery, 1938-1942, 13 October 1984; Interview with George W. Mills, Spotter, 13th Coast Artillery, 1939-1940, 3 October 1984; Mole; Olney; Webb; Dorrough; Bearss, passim.

[25]Interview with John William Graybill, Supply Officer, 13th Coast Artillery, 1942-1944, 11 July 1987; Keith; Bearss, pp. 199-201.

[26]Interview with Peter J. Lomagistro, Meteorological Specialist, 13th Coast Artillery, 1941-1945, 1 October 1987; Webb.

[27]Pensacola Journal, 6 April 1940, p. 3.

[28]Interview with Glen Hansen, Medic, 13th Coast Artillery Medical Detachment, 1942-1945, 3 October 1987.

[29]Interview with Vondi Cetorelli, Mail Clerk, 13th Coast Artillery, 1941-1945, 3 October 1987; Interview with Cecil Dennis, Cook, 13th Coast Artillery, 1943-1944, 3 October 1987;

Interview with R. Hoover Weems, Clerk, 13th Coast Artillery, 1941-1945, 3 October 1987.

[30]Interview with Roy Ross, Driver, 13th Coast Artillery Motor Pool, 1941-1945, 12 October 1984; Abbenante.

[31]Interview with John Agnello, Clerk 13th Coast Artillery, 1941-1945, 4 October 1985; Interview with H. Lee Ingram, Clerk, 13th Coast Artillery, 1941-1945, 4 October 1985; Interview with Edgar M. Blackburn, Clerk, 13th Coast Artillery, 1941-1944 and 1945-1946, 2 October 1987.

[32]Interview with George Grow, Editor, Barrancas Breeze, 1941-1942, 3 October 1987; Agnello; Crosby; Ingram; Keith; Medley; Olney.

[33]Grow.

[34]Grow; Olney.

[35]Agnello; Ingram; Lomagistro.

[36]Interview with William E. Stonecipher, Instructor, 13th Coast Artillery, 1941-1944, 12 October 1984.

[37]Mills.

[38]Olney.

[39]Interview with Joseph Harold Trinner, Clerk, 13th Coast Artillery, 1941-1942, 2 October 1987.

[40]Bearss, p. 86; Cetorelli.

[41]Larabee.

[42]Keith.

Bibliography

Abbenante, Jerry. Driver, 13th Coast Artillery Motor Pool, 1941-1943. Interview, 1 October 1987.

Agnello, John. Clerk, 13th Coast Artillery, 1941-1945. Interview, 4 October 1985.

Bearss, Edwin C. Pensacola Harbor Defense Project, 1890-1947. Denver: United States National Park Service, 1978.

Blackburn, Edgar M. Clerk, 13th Coast Artillery, 1941-1944 and 1945-1946. Interview, 2 October 1987.

Cetorelli, Vondi. Mail Clerk, 13th Coast Artillery, 1941-1945. Interview, 3 October 1987.

Chandler, John A. Gunnery Sergeant, 13th Coast Artillery, 1940-1944. Interview, 2 October 1987.

Crosby, Winston. Musician, 13th Coast Artillery Regimental Band, 1938-1945. Interviews, 3 October 1984 and 2 October 1987.

Dennis, Cecil. Cook, 13th Coast Artillery, 1943-1944. Interview, 3 October 1987.

Dorrough, Thomas A. Battery Officer and Battalion Supply Officer, 13th Coast Artillery, 1943-1945. Letters to author, 16 October 1988 and 21 February 1989.

Florida Municipal Record, vol. 11, no. 7 (November 1938): 22,50.

Gibson, Harry R. Clerk, 13th Coast Artillery, 1941. Interview, 12 October 1984.

Gosport, September 1939, pp. 9-10.

Graybill, John William. Supply Officer, 13th Coast Artillery, 1942-1944. Interview, 11 July 1987.

Grow, George. Editor, Barrancas Breeze, 1941-1942. Interview, 3 October 1987.

Hansen, Glen. Medic, 13th Coast Artillery Medical Detachment, 1942-1945. Interview, 3 October 1987.

Harry, McHenry. Gunner, 13th Coast Artillery, 1937-1940. Interview, 3 August 1987.

Hollihand, James E. Plotter, 13th Coast Artillery, 1932-1935 and 1938-1940. Interview, 13 July 1987.

Ingram, H. Lee. Clerk, 13th Coat Artillery, 1941-1945. Interview, 4 October 1985.

Johnston, Orville. Gunner, 13th Coast Artillery, 1937-1940. Interview, 13 October 1984.

Keith, John. Sergeant Major, 13th Coast Artillery, 1943-1947. Interview, 10 August 1987.

Larabee, Earl. Plotter, 13th Coast Artillery, 19432-1947. Interview, 20 July 1987.

Lewis, Emanuel Raymond. Seacoast Defenses of the United States: An Introductory History. Washington: Smithsonian Press, 1970; reprinted., Annapolis: Leeward Publications, Inc., 1979.

Lomagistro, Peter J. Meteorological Specialist, 13th Coast Artillery, 1941-1945. Interview, 1 October 1987.

McGehee, Russell H. Gun Commander, 13th Coast Artillery, 1941-1945. Conversation with author, 8 October 1988.

Medley, Oscar W. Gunnery Sergeant, 13th Coast Artillery, 1936-1942. Interview, 12 october 1984.

Mills, George W. Spotter, 13th Coast Artillery, 1939-1941. Interview, 3 October 1984.

Mole, William A. Plotter, 13th Coast Artillery, 1930-1940. Interview, 13 October 1984.

Nall, Herman E. Instructor, 13th Coast Artillery, 1938-1942. Interview, 13 October 1984.

Olney, Richard D. Lieutenant and Chemical Warfare Instructor, 13th Coast Artillery, 1940-1944. Interview, 2 January 1985.

"Organization Day Address," History Files, Gulf Islands National Seashore, Florida Unit, ND-133.

Pensacola Journal, 8 March 1931; 6 April 1936; 6 April 1940.

Peoples, James E. Gunner, 13th Coast Artillery, 1942-1943. Interview, 3 October 1987.

Photographic Files, Gulf Islnads National Seashore, Florida Unit, 1942-8 through 1942-20.

Ross, Roy. Driver, 13th Coast Artillery Motor Pool, 1941-1945. Interview, 12 October 1984.

Simmons, Fred H. Supply Officer, 13th Coast Artillery, 1944-1946. Interview, 12 October 1985.

Stonecipher, William E. Instructor, 13th Coast Artillery, 1941-1944. Interview, 12 October 1984.

Stroup, Philip W. Clerk, 13th Coast Artillery, 1941-1942. Interview, 1 October 1987.

Trinner, Joseph Harold. Clerk, 13th Coast Artillery, 1941-1942. Interviews, 12 October 1984 and 2 October 1987.

Webb, Lynn H. Battery Commander, 13th Coast Artillery, 1942-1945. Interview, 3 October 1987.

Weems, R. Hoover. Clerk, 13th Coast Artillery, 1941-1945. Interview, 3 October 1987.

Williamson, Mille E. Housewife, Fort Pickens Subpost, 1933-1942. Interview, 4 July 1987.