

Fort Stevens Review

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“The World Must Be Made Safe For Democracy”

Statement by President Woodrow Wilson, 2 April 1917 during his address to Congress asking for a declaration of war against Germany

by D. Lindstrom

Oregon members of the state's National Guard Coast Artillery saw service in France. They were spread out over a number of units. Some were assigned to new regiments especially organized for overseas duty. They included the 65 and the 69th Artillery, Coast Artillery Corps. Our story will focus on the 65th Artillery as information about it is more accessible, including the diary of John Ferguson. While in the service, John not only kept a diary, but he left a number of remarkable photos which his son donated to the Fort Stevens State Park Archives, OPRD.

In the beginning, John Ferguson joined the 11th Company, Coast Artillery, Oregon National Guard. This company from Coos Bay, Oregon was organized in 1916, activated for service at Fort Stevens in July 1917, and Federalized in August 1917. When it came to forming the 65th and the 69th Regiments, plus other units, the 11th Company was divided up amongst all of them. At the start of things John was a corporal. As things turned out, he was selected for officers training which will be discussed later. He also had a brother named Duncan who was a sergeant in the same company.

It was 13 December 1917 when orders were received from General Pershing to form a number of regiments for overseas duty. Two lists with three regiments each were drawn up. The 65th was included in the second list. It was assigned 8-inch howitzers and

was to be made up of men from the Coast Defenses of San Diego, Columbia, and Puget Sound.

Subsequent orders called for the Headquarters Company and Battery F to come from the Coast Defenses of Puget Sound, the Supply Company and Batteries C, D, and E from the Coast Defenses of the Columbia, and Battery A and B from the Coast Defenses of San Diego. Due to a lack of equipment, while stateside the men spent their time in drill and study for overseas duties.

Orders were issued for the troops from the Pacific Coast forts to converge at San Francisco. The Fort Stevens portion of the 65th included 31 officers and 820 enlisted men. The roster included federalized Oregon National Guardsmen from Oregon and Washington. The Washingtonians were garrisoning the Fort Stevens' sister installations of Forts Canby and Columbia. A contingent of draftees from North Dakota was included. Final orders were soon received for the Fort Stevens contingent to travel to San Francisco.

John wrote: *Left Ft. S. 2/26/18 Tuesday 7:15PM by rail thru Ptld & Willam Valley. Crossed Siskiyou's night of 2/27/18. Traveled south thru California until 1:20 PM. Stopped at Tracy for 12 or 14 hours. Arrived at S.F. 6 AM 3/1/18 & marched from train direct to transport docks. Boarded No Pac (USS North Pacific) and remained at wharf loading until 10 AM.*

Now it is necessary to digress a little. In late November 1917 on the opposite side of the nation, an officer of the Reserve Corps and National Army, 2nd Lieutenant Harrison Clippert, Field Artillery, Reserve Corps, or F.A.R.C. and a number of other 2nd Lieutenants were ordered to report for active duty. Within a month these individuals embarked from New York City for France with orders to report to the Commanding General, American Expeditionary Forces. Within a few months, Lieutenant Harrison and John Ferguson crossed paths.

The USS Northern Pacific got under way from San Francisco on March 3, and soon crossed the Golden Gate headed for the Panama Canal. Once through the canal, the ship headed north for New Jersey. **John wrote:** *Started off this morning by omitting breakfast...It was ½ laziness & ½ seasickness. Started for a hearty dinner to make up for the breakfast & changed my mind abruptly at the dining room. We are heading nearly north. The sea is quite a lot rougher than it has been.*

What seemed like a last minute decision, on March 16, the ship pulled into Newport News, Virginia. The word was they were loading up the guns. What's not clear is whether or not these were the 8-inch howitzers that were originally assigned to the 65th Artillery, CAC. **John wrote:** *[By] 6:30 PM we were heading north again. Suppose we are going to N.Y. but I have given up all thinking or guessing...Poked along slowly all night & sailed into NY Harbor about 8 or 9 this morning. The Statue of Liberty surely looked good...stayed on board until about 2:30. Marched to train. Reached Camp Merritt N.J. about 6 PM.*

Acting Specialist Corporal Ferguson was part of the service command for Battery D, 2nd Battalion, 65th Artillery, CAC. And so it was that when he and his acquaintances of similar ranks boarded the HMS Mauretenia for Liverpool, England on March 24, they discovered that no accommodations had been arranged for them. A Major offered to have some of the privates from Battery D removed from their quarters to make room for the specialists. However, John and the others didn't want to do that. Now the stewards held back some berths and were trying to sell them. Having found this out, John "greased" the palm of one for two dollars and got a decent berth.

Being part of the service command, John spend much of his time during the crossing at a typewriter; keeping track of men, payroll, equipment, orders, etc. He made his desk from boxes and trunks. Keeping busy was probably a good idea. **John wrote:** *The abandon ship drills are taking good form now & there is no*

reason why – should we be submarined – most men should not be saved. We are taking over a bunch of red cross nurses & the officers are having a beautiful time playing cards, etc. with them. It is too bad I'm not a Colonel.

On April 1, 1918, **John wrote:** *On my way down to my "downy couch" last night passed the dining hall & church was being held, so stepped in. Two nurses were singing "Nearer My God to Thee" –very appropriate for this time. It was a queer looking gathering to be holding Easter services. The room was crowded & lots of us were standing, everyone with belts – canteens, revolvers & life preservers on. A couple of sentries with rifles paced up & down the aisles. It did not look like church, to say the least.*

When close to Ireland sub chasers and a dirigible met them and by the next morning the Mauretenia landed at Liverpool, England. By April 7, the 65th made its way by train to Southampton, England and boarded what was essentially a cattle boat. **John wrote:** *Had an awful place to sleep – way down in a foul smelling little room with benches around...slept on the floor. During the night water washed in & got one leg wet as far as my knee, but I did not care – stayed right in it till morning. We arrived at Le Harve, France about 4 [AM].*

After a breakfast of cheese and coffee the troops disembarked and hiked several miles over challenging terrain to a rest camp. More challenges lay ahead. The next morning rations for one day were issued and the six-mile hike to a French train began. The French train; it was awful. It was made up of box cars and third class coaches. Another lad who experienced riding on the same train didn't think much of the small French style box cars either. He remarked that the American Humane Society would never allow eight horses to ride in one of them, let alone, "35 men with packs and rations."



Break time...hard time train ride

The staff, including John, was assigned to a box car but a captain moved them to a coach. That car soon developed a hot box (the oiled packing at the end of the axle overheated), and the men were moved to a box car with no room to lay down. They rode sitting up for three more days and nights. John remarked that among their rations were cans of salmon packed in Astoria, Oregon.

Well, maybe we shouldn't feel too sorry for the troops. The train traveled through scenic countryside and old, picturesque towns. As it made stops, some men rushed out to find the nearest shop and brought back their canteens filled with liquid other than water! Then there were the times when the train traveled at a crawl and troops jumped out and walk alongside of it.

On April 11, 1918 the 65th arrived at Limoges, France some two-hundred fifty miles southwest of Paris. **John wrote:** *None of us had washed since leaving [England] & our clothes and selves were surely dirty. Marched about ¼ or ½ mile to our barracks...The Staff is quartered in "Salle d'Honneur" or "Hall of Honor." There are all kinds of old relics – bayonets – shields – rifles etc. on the walls. There are old dungeons below...we have American rations once more – we have barrack bags so we are happy. Several days later **John continued,** Three of our staff went on passes last night & several of the others. Long & Hager took their guns with them & Long started to shoot up the town. Both are in the guard house now. They were pretty filled up with wine & beer when they started out.*

The entire 65th Artillery, CAC remained at Limoges for approximately three weeks. While there an apparent change of plans emerged. The 8-inch howitzers, originally assigned to the 65th were sent elsewhere. Instead, the regiment was scheduled to receive English 9.2-inch howitzers. It was a siege gun principally used behind the lines. Its range was approximately 10,500 yards, but the gun was ungainly. For transport, each one required a parade of three carriages pulled by a treaded Holt tractor. Before World War I Britain ordered a number of these guns from American manufacturers, but the order was never filled. As British capacity increased, The US Government ordered well over one-hundred from them, but only 40 were delivered (Wikipedia). A little known fact of World War I is that the 65th Artillery CAC was the only American regiment to use the 9.2-inch howitzer.

For the most part, instructional pamphlets on how to operate the howitzer were nonexistent. **John wrote:** *Have been working hard all day copying a pamphlet on the 92" [9.2] inch howitzer. It seems that there is only 1 such pamphlet here & we can use it for a limited time*

*only. Lt. C. is drawing the diagrams while we are copying the text. Several days later **John continued,** Have another book to copy on service of the piece 92" [9.2] howitzer. Four days later, **John wrote,** Worked till 9:30 last night on my "book," **and the next day,** Finished the book last night & went for a little stroll. After several more days, **John wrote:** Went out last night for a little while, but came back about 7:30 & helped proof read the "book" we had to copy.*

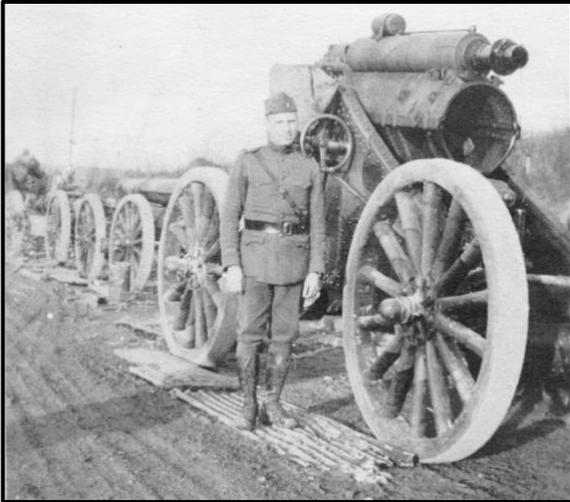
It wasn't all drudgery. The citizens of Limoges treated the American lads as heroes, and with French-English dictionaries they managed to get by. Some were invited to homes of families who had a marriageable daughter and apparently more than one romance developed. Meanwhile, the newly minted officers did their best to keep the troops in condition through long hikes and drills. As for John, well, someone had to keep things tidy. On May 1, **he wrote,** *Worked late again last night & feel tired all the time. Muster rolls & payrolls are all ready & after we take a few dozen reports will have the 1st of the month over with. May 3, If I don't get a typewriter soon I'll go crazy...I have to run all over the place every time I want to write something. Surely have been busy the past few days as we are getting ready to move some of the men into billets.*

On May 5, the move was on. The First Battalion traveled a short distance to Nexon, and the Second Battalion, of which Battery D and John was a part, moved by truck some twelve miles to Pierre Buffiere. The Third Battalion remained in Limoges for a short time. Here, an American lad observed, is "Where the men really received their first lessons in handling the English 9.2-inch guns that did so much damage later on [to] the front lines. This type of gun was all together new to the members of the Regiment." They acquired a quick knowledge of its operation and soon joined the First Battalion in Nexon. To be continued.



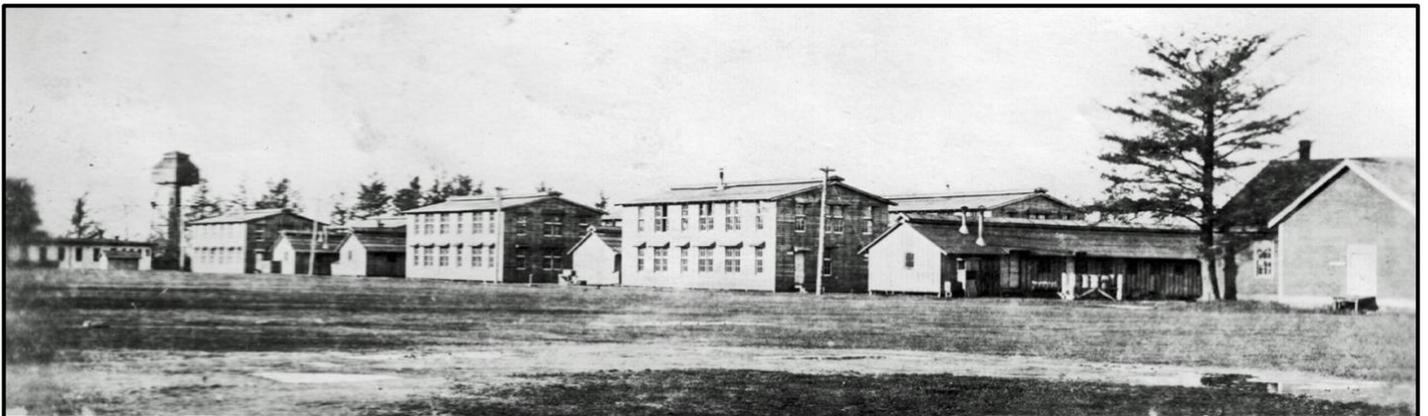
Men of the 65th learning about the English 9.2 howitzer

100 Years Ago Federalized Oregon National Guard Coast Artillerymen Were in France Fighting the War to End All Wars



A soldier of the 65th Artillery, CAC is standing by the English 9.2 howitzer. The 65th was the only American regiment to use it. While awkward and tedious to move, it was effective against the enemy's trenches.

While the photo shows troops at Fort Stevens on the move, it's impossible to tell which regiment it is. The trucks in the background were known as Liberty Trucks. They had an open cab with a canvas bonnet to cover the driver. A four-cylinder engine with chain drive was used. Actually, they worked quite well.



The photo reveals the cantonment built at Fort Stevens, Oregon during World War I. While the troops waited for its completion they spent a very miserable winter in tents. It lay between the building to the far left, today's Museum/Visitors Center, and the building to the far right. The latter building is near the earthworks.

A word about the 2018 calendar. The Celebrating Freedom – Celebrating Veterans event will be held May 26-27. Remembering the Japanese Submarine Attack on Fort Stevens will be on June 21. Over Labor Day weekend a new event will take the place of the Civil War reenactment. The new event, still in the planning stages, will be over September 1-2. Watch for more information on the FOFS website.

Regarding sources for this issue's article: Many thanks to the Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan who facilitated study of the Clippert Family Papers 1863-1962. The John Ferguson diary and the accompanying photos are located in the Fort Stevens State Park Archives, Oregon Parks and Recreation Department. The iconic Hanft book, Fort Stevens, was most useful. Various web sites were also visited. The author takes full responsibility for any errors and omissions.