

Fort Stevens Review

Published by the Friends of Old Fort Stevens, An Oregon 501(c)3 Organization

Helping To Preserve The History Of Oregon's Fort Stevens State Park

(503) 861-1470 www.visitfortstevens.com foofs@teleport.com

Now on Facebook



Summer 2016

Three Issues: Winter, Spring, Summer

For The Record: A Discussion of the Men and Their Early War War II Era Units At The Harbor Defenses of the Columbia

By D. Lindstrom

As World War II loomed and became a reality, where did men of the Harbor Defenses of the Columbia come from and how did they feel about things? Let's find out.

Our story begins with Battery E, 3rd Coast Artillery. This unit kept the harbor defenses on life support during the so called quiet years. Battery E had a rich history dating back to 1799 as part of the 3rd Artillery. During the War of 1812 Battery E saw action against the British. When the Mexican War came along, Battery E was part of the Brownsville episode and withstood a siege of 160 days. At the Battle of Buena Vista Batteries E and C saved the day. During the Civil War, Battery E distinguished itself in Florida and later joined Sherman's Army as it chased Confederate General Joseph E. Johnson. After the Civil War, the 3rd Artillery was transferred to the West Coast.

At the outbreak of the Spanish American War Battery E was posted at Fort Mason, San Francisco, and then at the Presidio, San Francisco. Other units of the 3rd Artillery Corps were sent to the Philipppians. As Hawaii was coming under the authority of the United States, Battery E was sent out to Honolulu in 1904 and stayed at Camp McKinley until mid 1905. Afterwards the battery was assigned to Fort Rosecrans, San Diego, California where they spent their time practicing submarine mine planting and mine target practice. In 1924 they were transferred to Fort Stevens and the Harbor Defenses of the Columbia as caretakers.

With Battery E in place, the only active gun battery at the of the Columbia was the six-inch Battery Pratt at Fort Stevens. It was essentially a river battery designed to protect the then non-existent submarine mine field. The only exception was when the 249th Coast Artillery, Oregon National Guard held their annual practice sessions and took over most of the batteries and stations. When world conditions so alarmed Congress and the military, funds were finally allocated to increase the standing army. Consequently, in 1939 the 3rd Coast Artillery underwent some changes. In addition to Battery E, the Headquarters Detachment and Battery F were established. These additions allowed Battery Clark, the twelve-inch mortar battery, to be activated along the side of Battery Pratt.

The pace of growth for personnel at the harbor defenses gained speed. During February 1940 the 3rd Coast Artillery was deactivated and a brand new regiment was born at Fort Stevens, the 18th Coast Artillery. Some former 3rd Coast Artillery personnel were transferred to the 18th. This new regiment consisted of Headquarters Battery, Battery A, and Battery B. One year later it grew to include the "Headquarters and Headquarters Battery 1st Battalion, 18th Coast Artillery, and Battery C, 18th Coast Artillery..." Due to the expanding numbers of men at the Columbia harbor defenses, on November 8, 1940 the War Department authorized activation of Service Command 1924 and service troops were brought in.

Manpower was still lean. Three hundred and fifty draftees arrived, in early 1941, from California and Portland, Oregon to form a Provisional Training Battalion. They were slated to fill out the ranks of the 249th Coast Artillery which was federalized on September 16, 1940. The men of the 249th were united with their selectee brethren a month later. Then in 1942 a number of draftees, mainly from Ohio, arrived. These individuals were mostly assigned to the 18th Coast Artillery.

These new arrivals descended on what was really a fraternal organization, the 249th Coast Artillery. Its parent unit, the 2nd Infantry Regiment, Oregon National Guard, was constituted in 1887 by an act of the Oregon legislature. When the Spanish American war broke out the unit was “mustered into Federal service at Portland, Oregon” during May 1898 with all the other Oregon National Guard units. It was designated the 2nd Regiment Oregon Volunteer Infantry. They were soon taken by rail to San Francisco and from Fort Mason sailed through the Golden Gate for the Philippines. After Spain gave up, the Oregon units stayed on for a few months and took part in early stages of putting down the Philippine Insurrection. After returning to San Francisco they were mustered out of Federal service on August 7, 1899.

The War Department was searching for ways to use local volunteer troops to back up the regular Army in the event of a coastal invasion. The 2nd Infantry was reorganized in 1900 as the 4th Infantry Regiment, and detachments were organized. As the concept developed, on December 13, 1911 the Regiment was “converted and redesignated the Coast Artillery Corps, Oregon National Guard.” Including Portland, eight companies were formed up and down Western Oregon. With war clouds gathering in Europe, four more companies were added in 1916. (Note: The 1939 ONG yearbook states that the first company Coast Artillery was formed in 1908 at Astoria, Oregon and was dropped in 1910. Not all sources include this information.)

For the second time in its history, on August 5, 1917 the Coast Artillery Corps, Oregon National Guard, was drafted into federal service at Fort Stevens. In 1918 after reductions in the number of companies, the unit was known as the 5th-7th Companies, Coast Defenses of the Columbia. In short order the whole unit was disbanded. After World War I, more changes occurred. In 1921 the company was reconstituted as the Oregon Coast Artillery. During the latter part of 1922 and early 1923, the unit was known as the 483d-466th Companies Coast Artillery. For a short time in early 1924 the unit was called the 249th Artillery, Coast Artillery Corps. If you are still following this, FINALLY, on April 16, 1924 the unit was designated the 249th Coast Artillery Regiment, Harbor Defense (the designation we all know and love). For the record, the 249th was “inactivated 15 September 1945 at Fort Canby.”

In the 1930's while Battery E, 3rd Coast Artillery cared for the Harbor Defenses of the Columbia, “the main thing it had going for it was the hard core of the 249th Coast Artillery Regiment.” In the words of 249th veteran Vernon Greig, “What these people lacked in equipment, they made up in spirit. The firing batteries came from logging towns of that time which were Albany, Ashland, Cottage Grove, Klamath Falls, and Marshfield (Coos Bay). They were basically a rowdy bunch always ready for a fight.” Those in Salem's headquarters battery were farmers and white collar workers. But they too had their share of “toughies.” As Vernon recalled, they all grew up in the depression and did not expect easy times. During summer training, the firing batteries got into fights with each other. The summer camp of 1940 is an example (see the back page). Battery A from Klamath Falls and C Battery from Marshfield got into it one night at Seaside. They tore slats out of a picket fence and went at each other. The medics got a lot of training after that one, recalled Vernon. Loren Finch, an ex-pro boxer and First Sargent of C Battery, wore some heavy slat marks for the rest of camp. Rumors of court marshals never materialized. Oh, through the years there were other incidents as well...too many to remember. The firing batteries tolerated the boys in the headquarters battery and probably thought they weren't worth the bother.

Another point is that throughout the years 249th batteries often had members from the same family. Early on, in the small headquarters battery of thirty-four men that Vernon was part of, there were six sets of brothers! Throughout the units there were some father and son combinations. A great example is the well known Stewart family out of Cottage Grove who made their fortune in logging (just before federalization the father was “retired” as a major). In the event of an emergency, these guys were the main line of defense. As Vernon said, the 249th wouldn't be the ones shivering in their fox holes.

Now enters the commander of the 249th Coast Artillery, Oregon National Guard, Col. Clifton Irwin. Beginning in 1930 he held that position throughout the decade and beyond. In 1916 he earned a BS degree in civil engineering from Stanford University. He was a World War I veteran who served with distinction in France with the 18th Engineers (Railway). After the war Irwin dabbled in real estate and insurance. In 1939 he was employed by the engineering department of the Oregon Public Utilities Commission.

In October 1941 Col. Irwin became the first Oregon National Guard army officer to take command of a permanent military garrison of the United States Army, the Harbor Defenses of the Columbia. In so doing he relinquished command of the 249th Coast Artillery. An undated newspaper article stated that the 249th was the only former Oregon National Guard unit to remain in Oregon after federalization in September 1940. Col. Irwin was a tough disciplinarian who drove the 249th hard and carried out this approach as the new commander of the harbor defenses. It was sink or swim. Vernon thought of him as a natural born soldier and leader. He marched his men up and down the sand dunes so often that they called themselves “Irwin's Foot Cavalry.” As the war with Japan loomed, Col. Irwin lectured his men on the pending danger. Behind his back they called him “Jap Happy Irwin.” Too bad he wasn't in command when the Japanese finally did show up. At that time the key battery commanders were still from the 249th CA. Most certainly Irwin would have ordered return fire and blown that submarine out of the water. The story goes that at one point the culprit was so close to shore that Battery Russell couldn't depress its guns far enough to get at it. Then there's another one from across the river. A few days before the shelling Battery Allen had successfully aimed its guns at very spot where the insolent submarine was firing on Battery Russell. In this instance Allen's position on top of Cape Disappointment gave it the advantage.

So this was the setting that new recruits and selectees arrived in. At first there was animosity. They had new uniforms and equipment while complaining about the disruption to their lives. This didn't go over very well with the 249th. They were proud about being volunteers and all their training. In their minds they had earned a higher status. The new arrivals thought the 249th were “suckers.” Adding insult to injury, some of the new men were college graduates and resented taking orders from someone who hadn't finished high school and who was “beneath their station.” Jay Krom remembers that Irwin had far less respect for the new

boys and far more for the 249th boys. Jay should know, he was one of the “new boys” and experienced Irwin’s attitude first hand. Even so, one has to have a new respect for the Colonel. He had his hands full. Within a relatively short time things calmed down, old insults were forgotten, and for good reasons some men were transferred to new units and batteries. Even so, there was always “strong competition between the 249th and the 18th.” As late as 1944 signs of this rivalry were still showing up. Major Lyman, assigned to Fort Canby across the river from Fort Stevens, wrote to his wife that he doubted that anyone from the 249th could teach azimuth problems from sights on Polaris at the Fort Stevens officer’s school (Buda Collection).

As evidenced by a letter mailed in 1941 to parents and relatives of the new recruits and selectees by the commander of the newly formed 18th Coast Artillery, they were grumbling to their families about life at the Harbor Defenses of the Columbia. Such a letter was beyond the call of duty. Lt. Colonel Rowntree began by acknowledging that he had received letters from parents and relatives asking about conditions at the defenses. The rapid expansion of the Army made it necessary to use cantonments in a number of camps and posts. Fort Stevens was no exception. However, he wrote that the majority of his men lived in permanent barracks. Reassuringly, he said the men slept in real beds with plenty of blankets. And the food? Well the men had plenty of “substantial and appetizing food which is planned and prepared by a well trained group of Mess Sergeants and cooks in each battery.”

He wrote that everything was being done to safeguard his men’s health. Should a need arise, immediate help and attention was available from the medical staff and hospital on the post. He wrote that seven doctors, three dentists, eight nurses, and forty-three Medical Detachment men were at the ready. The post even had a veterinarian to inspect the food eaten by the men.

He informed his readers that the first phase of training was completed. He said they were developing into a well coordinated team, much like a football team. The training called for a full day’s work, and the men were “eager” to do so. He assured that his men had become hardened and well adjusted to military life. He also mentioned that religious provisions were provided for men of all faiths and asked his readers to write often to their loved one. (One has to smile at Roundtree’s effort.)

In the early days of the war the men were faced with a common dilemma at the Harbor Defenses of the Columbia. With only Spanish American War era coastal guns available, the belief was that they were vulnerable to attack. While some may disagree, yours truly believes that the Columbia defenses were the weakest on the Pacific Coast. They lacked the larger caliber guns found at other forts. The defenses were stationary with no viable mobile equipment available, including the cumbersome railroad mounted mortars sitting on sidings at Fort Stevens. Tactically both Fort Stevens and Fort Canby across the river could be cut off by land attack. Vern recalls that it felt like rats caught in a trap. Initially few machine guns were available, and the only other defense was from small arms. Equipment was old and the Coast Artillery was at the end of the Army’s equipment distribution chain. Consequently, the focus was on passive defense. The men trained to fight as an infantry and amazing barbed wire defenses were created. They consisted of two rows six feet high with the center filled with concertina wire. There were three and four sets at strategic places including certain beaches.

Furthermore, should the enemy land at the mouth of the Columbia River, additional troops weren’t available to come to the rescue. The men knew that should this happen they were doomed and were prepared to die. Vern and others recalled many discussions about the situation. There was talk about retreating up Highway 26 as far as the tunnel some seventy miles from Fort Stevens, but there is no evidence that this was part of any tactile plan. Col. Irwin believed an enemy landing would come from the south near Seaside and over take the Harbor Defenses of the Columbia. A war game in 1911, that included referees from the War Department, confirmed this weakness. He also advocated that the enemy would use the abundance of scotch broom as an offensive weapon by setting it on fire. These conditions contributed to coalescing the troops into a cooperative fighting force.



Battery Russell: 249th Family Day?

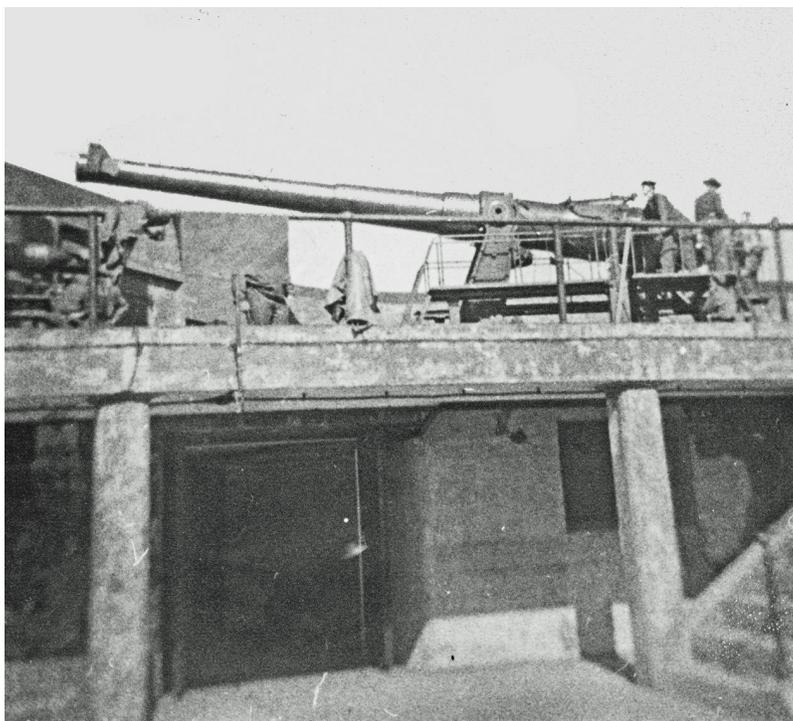
FOR THE RECORD

As the war scare escalated, the composition of the 249th Coast Artillery, Oregon National Guard was adjusted to include an additional battery.

Battery F was added before Federalization in September 1940. Throughout the 1930’s and into 1940 certain units remained the same such as the Headquarters batteries, Band, Medical Detachment, and the Searchlight Battery. Note the comparison of the “firing batteries:”

	1930’s	1940
Battery A	Albany	Klamath Falls
Battery B	Ashland	Ashland
Battery C	Coos Bay	Klamath Falls
Battery D	Klamath Falls	Albany
Battery E	Cottage Grove	Cottage Grove
Battery F		Coos Bay

A Look At Summer Field Training For The 249th Coast Artillery, Oregon National Guard



Btry Russell firing sub-caliber. 249th CAC, ONG
Summer 1939. Photo by Bill Bentson.
Fort Stevens, Oregon

The 1940 summer field training began on June 11 and ended on the 25th. (Note: The photo was taken in 1939.) The troops arrived at Camp Rilea, then Camp Clatsop, by train and convoy. By the second day the men “took over the stations and equipment at Fort Stevens.” The 1st Battalion, Batteries A, B, and C were assigned to Battery Russell, a 10-inch gun and Battery Pratt a 6-inch gun. Men also traveled across the river to practice on Battery Allen, a 6-inch gun at Fort Canby.

The 2nd Battalion, Batteries D, E, and F took over the 3-inch anti-aircraft and machine guns. (See the third page for the home towns of the batteries.) The Searchlight Battery from Salem, joined the 2nd Battalion for “considerable night work” and sound locator practice. (At this time the Searchlight Battery was not designated by a letter.) Arrangements were made for aircraft to tow targets enabling bursts of fire from the “long 3-inch guns and the fast firing machine guns.”

For the 10-inch and 6-inch guns sub-caliber firing took place. The photo illustrates this well. The barrel remained in-battery at all times, a platform was attached behind the breach, and a weight was attached to the front of the barrel for balance. Shells, much smaller than the regular ones, were fired through a barrel insert. A balance weight for a 10-inch barrel was recently found at Fort Stevens. It is considered a very rare find.