

NEWSLETTER

Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

January 2017

Editor: Steve Johnson

FOCWA Remembers Don Van Auker When the Friends of Civil War Alcatraz was organized in 2002, Don Van Auker was one of the founding members. He shared the vision of supporting the National Park Service in promoting Civil War interpretation on the island. Don served in the United States Army and was a member of the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War (Ellsworth Camp 23). He was very knowledgeable about important battles of the Civil War, having visited many battlefield sites with his cherished wife, Betty. Don was the first secretary of our organization and for a time its newsletter editor. He was a reliable, enthusiastic member who will be sorely missed. Our condolences to his wife and family.

The Rodman Cannon The replica Rodman cannon at the Pier 33 landing is a reminder of the most powerful cannons on Fort Alcatraz used in the defense of San Francisco Bay. Two 15-inch Rodmans first arrived on the island in 1864 and by the end of



Replica of a Rodman cannon on Pier 33 Landing

the year troops had mounted them in position and made them operational on the south and west batteries. The troops were relieved to have them because the older Columbiad cannons could burst unexpectedly due to cracks inside the tube— a result of uneven cooling in the manufacturing process. It was Captain (later Brevet Brigadier General) Thomas Jackson Rodman, an artillery officer at the Fort Pitt, PA, foundry who invented the process of making cannons stronger and safer. By keeping the inside of the cannon cooled with water and the outside heated, impurities migrated to the outside as the iron cooled. Since the metal would cool from the inside out, it prevented cracks from forming inside the tube and thus made it stronger.

Dates to Remember
Tuesday, January 17, 2017
Peninsula CW Roundtable
Lecture: "Newspapers in the Civil War" 11:30 am

Thursday, Jan. 19, 2017
SF Civil War Roundtable
Lecture: 1st Kansas Regt. (Colored) 7:45 pm

Saturday, Jan. 28, 2017
Indigenous Peoples Day on Alcatraz

Saturday, Jan. 28, 2017
Civil War Day, Fort Point
10:00 am to 5 pm

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These powerful cannons weighed 50,000 pounds and, using 130 pounds of black powder, at 20 degrees elevation could send a 440 pound cannonball up to three and a half miles. But being smoothbore cannons, the cannonball would wobble as it left the cannon and might or might not hit an enemy ship, especially if it was moving at a good clip. No doubt the impact in the water created by the size of the shell was enough to scare the pants off the sailors, though.



Loading a Rodman cannon on Alcatraz. Photo: Bancroft Library

Loading the cannon would require the exertion of at least four soldiers to lift the massive cannonball using tongs inserted into the two holes of the cannonball for that purpose. Several bags of gunpowder were first placed in the barrel and rammed down the tube, followed by the cannonball - either solid shot or an explosive shell. The blast would be enough to deafen the ears* , but fortunately for the soldiers on Alcatraz, the Rodmans were rarely fired and mainly required constant treatment for rust and corrosion caused by the sea air.



Moving these large cannons into place was done by means of a lifting gin, basically a huge tripod with a series of pulleys which give great mechanical advantage. Here Union soldiers are removing a Confederate cannon from its mount. Lifting a 15,000 pound cannon would only require 10 men.

A 15-inch Rodman at Fort Pickens in Pensacola Harbor. A steel and rubber tampion protects the muzzle from the elements. Note the gibbet on the right, which was another method of loading the cannon. A block and tackle was attached and was used to lift the cannonball to the muzzle, and was then guided into the tube.

Photo credit: seacoastartillery.com



All the Rodman cannons were removed from the island and eventually scrapped; the last ones were scrapped for their metal during World War II. More modern rifled cannons were to replace them. However, a Rodman cannon can still be seen at Fort Mason, near the Youth Hostel, which was the site of the Black Point Battery.

A 10-inch Rodman on a center-pintle carriage. The pintle would keep the carriage in place when the cannon recoiled from firing. The cannon would slide back from the recoil on top of the carriage and would be slid back into firing position after being reloaded. The Black Point battery had six of these cannons. This is the real-life twin to the Rodman replica on Pier 33. (Photo and info thanks to John Martini)





Children on Alcatraz find a better use for the Rodmans.

Photo thanks to John Martini

*Editor's Note: Deafness was a common hazard of artillerymen, as there was no real protection for the ears when a gun went off. My great-grandfather was in the 6th Illinois Light Artillery at St. Petersburg and after the war received a pension due to deafness.

Resources:

“Mammoth Guns” <https://www.nps.gov/fowa/learn/historyculture/mammoth.htm>

Fortress Alcatraz by John Martini

“Rodman Cannon” Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rodman_gun

San Francisco Civil War Roundtable January talk <http://www.sfcwrt.com/170119.html>

Peninsula Civil War Roundtable January talk <http://www.peninsulacivilwarroundtable.org/meeting-of-january-17-2017/>