

NEWSLETTER

Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

JUNE 2016

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Painting the Alcatraz Cannon The Friends of Civil War Alcatraz for years has taken upon itself the task of keeping the cannon in the sally port in good condition. This is no easy task, because the cannon is exposed to the salt air and moisture every day. This can take its toll on anything made of metal. Periodically the cannon has to be cleaned and repainted, and fortunately we have a crew of dedicated workers who come to the island for a day to do just that. Recently volunteers travelled to Alcatraz in their work clothes and got right to work, scraping away the rust, washing off the dirt and grime, and finally putting a fresh coat of paint on the cannon. By the time they were through, the cannon looked like it had just come out of the foundry.



The work took about 6 hours, and besides painting the cannon, the work included sanding down the carriage, vacuuming up the dust, taping off the metal parts, and painting the carriage as well. FOCWA provided the paint, paintbrushes, sandpaper, and drop cloths. Phil Blake, the team leader, says this is the 4th time we have painted the cannon. The paint job should last about 3 years, and then it will be time to do this all over again.

While the crew were painting, visitors stopped to ask about the work, which gave the crew a perfect opportunity to do some interpretation — the purpose of the cannon, the ammunition used, how it was fired, etc. Quite a few visitors went out of their way to thank

the volunteers for what they were doing. Members are encouraged to come to the island at least once a month and spend some time in the sally port to either a cannon drill, or give periodic talks about the cannon and the island's defenses in the 1860's.



The cannon painting crew: Gary Harris, Gary Fromm, Phil Blake, Tom Johnston, Brad Schall, and Ranger John Cantwell

The History of the Howitzer on Alcatraz (Thanks to member John Martini)

The cannon on Alcatraz, classified as a howitzer, was cast in 1864 in Reading, Pennsylvania by Seyfert, McManus, & Company. It is similar to the types of howitzers in use at Fort Point and Fort Alcatraz in the 1860's. It was acquired by the Park Service in the mid-1980's from the NPS museum clearing house to be put on display at Fort Point. It was there for about a dozen years, when the park superintendent decided to move it to Alcatraz in 1998.

Called more properly a flank defense howitzer, its role was to defend a fort's exterior walls from attacking forces. It could fire solid shot, or, more often, canister shot. Round iron or lead balls were packed with sawdust (to keep the balls from crowding) into a tin canister, which was coated with a beeswax/turpentine solution to keep the canister from corroding. Once fired, the balls spread out in a conical formation.

Although this cannon never saw action on Alcatraz, it is a potent reminder of how deadly these weapons could be, especially if fired alternately every 30 seconds. Visitors can easily understand how two of these cannon could ward off an invading force advancing up from the island's pier. Ironically, these cannon became obsolete within a year.



No Board Meeting in June It has been decided to postpone the meeting of the board of directors until July, due to a number of illnesses of board members. The date and place of the next meeting will be announced in early July.

Memorial Day 2016, San Francisco National Cemetery

Members of FOCWA attended the Memorial Day parade and ceremony at the Presidio and at the National Cemetery. The parade was led by the 191st U.S. Army Band, followed by ROTC units, Sea Cadets, Girl and Boy Scouts, Veteran's organizations, and re-enactors in uniforms from the Revolutionary War to the Korean War. (The Girl and Boy Scouts, by the way, were responsible for placing all 37,000 flags at the grave sites prior to Memorial Day.

Besides taking part in the parade, many FOCWA/SUVCW members positioned themselves in the cemetery after the ceremonies; at various grave sites they told the story of the notable Union soldiers (and one famous female spy) buried there. Visitors very much appreciated this and were quite surprised to know that thousands of Union soldiers are lying in the peace and solitude of the Presidio National Cemetery, within sight of Alcatraz.

(Pictures follow. Photo Credits: Steven Hormel)



FOCWA members Ken Felton, Brad Schall, Steve Johnson, Constance Smith, and Charles Gardali march in the Memorial Day Parade.



FOCWA member Gary Hormel near the grave site of Captain Stewart, telling visitors about Stewart's service on Alcatraz during the Civil War.