

NEWSLETTER

Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

June 2023

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Island News

The island has been short of rangers for some weeks due to the long process of vetting candidates for a permanent position on the island. This has resulted in some days with only two rangers on the island, though thankfully there have been volunteers to help out. Now some new rangers are coming on board, and their profiles will be featured in future issues. There is still a need for volunteers, especially on Sundays. As the summer season begins, boats even on weekdays are filling up, so whatever days we can volunteer to help would be much appreciated by the staff.

Dates to Remember
Saturday, June 17
Zoom Board Meeting
10 am - 11 am

Saturday, August 12
Living History Day
Fort Point
10 am - 5 pm

Mini-Living History Day on Alcatraz

We have been working with the 20th Maine re-enactors who have expressed interest in coming to the island for living history events. One idea has been for them to come for a mini-living history event during which they could get a tour of the island and work out the activities they could do to educate the public. This idea has the approval of the rangers, so to set this idea in motion it will be discussed at the next board meeting.

Memorial Day at the Presidio

This year there was a commemoration program at the Presidio National Cemetery that was organized by the administrators of the Golden Gate Cemeteries. It included speeches by veterans, politicians, and serving military personnel. A band played the service anthems and the flag was raised to the national anthem. Afterward people were invited to attend the graveside talks conducted by Constance Smith (at Pauline Cushman's site), Ken Felton (at Matthew Arthur's site), and Steve Johnson (at the 1898 Civil War Memorial). Each site attracted over 50 people and visitors expressed their gratitude that we were there. Later Steve gave tours at Fort Point and at the end of the day the rangers invited the visitors to help bring down and fold the large garrison flag. It was great to watch the excitement of the visitors - including kids - as they helped fold the flag properly, which no doubt was a new experience for them. It was the perfect end to a day of remembrance.



Steve talks to a visitor who told of his ancestors' lives during the Civil War.

Swords in the Civil War

Swords were an important component to military battles since ancient times, but by 1860 they had become pretty much obsolete because modern warfare was now done at a distance, with muskets and cannons. However, they were symbols of authority and officers and sergeants were required to carry them, though many found them to be cumbersome and rarely used them. Stonewall Jackson drew his sword so infrequently it rusted in its scabbard. And when out of ammunition his troops threw stones rather than engage in swordfights.¹ Infantrymen often got rid of their bayonets (considered a short sword) on long marches because they were seldom used and added weight to their equipment.

There were a few occasions when swords played a role in Civil War battles. At the first battle of Bull Run (Manassas) the Confederate cavalry, swirling their sabres and giving the rebel yell, scattered the inexperienced Union troops and helped win the day. The battle at Brandywine Station (June 1863) was the largest cavalry battle in the war, with over 18,000 horsemen engaged. There were many instances of cavalry units charging with sabers, and close fighting with swords.² Also, just prior to the battle at Gettysburg, there was the battle of Fairfield (July 3, 1863), in which both sides relied on heavily on their sabers during the fight.³

Swords were not standard issue and officers had to buy their own, though sometimes the army would award a sword to individual officers for meritorious actions. Here were the most common swords during the war:

Light Cavalry Saber

This curved 35-inch steel blade had a brass hilt and the hand guard spanned the entire handle. It was used for pointing directions to the troops and for slasing when necessary.



Credit: US Army Heritage

Artillery Saber

This 1840 style saber was commonly used by artillery officers, usually to point direction of fire for the cannon crews but also for self defense if the battery was breached. The blade was shorter (32 inches) and more curved than the cavalry sword, and had a brass

¹ 1. Ross Strong, "How comon were swords in the Civil War?" <https://www.quora.com/How-common-were-sword-fights-during-the-US-Civil-War>

² <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/10-facts-brandy-station>

³ <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/battle-fairfield>

handle with the grip that was bound with brass wire. ⁴ This is the sword worn by member Gary Hormel when he is in uniform, giving tours of Fort Alcatraz.



Gary portraying Captain Stewart as he gives a tour on the island. Officers and sergeants in full dress uniform would wear a red sash around the waist, with the sword belt around the sash, holding the sword inside the metal scabbard. Child visitors are especially inter-



ested in the sword, having seen many pirate movies (but not so many Civil War movies). Gary would explain that swords are not toys but a weapon and should be treated with respect.

Foot Artillery Sword

This sword had no curve and the blade was just 19 inches long. It was given as a sidearm to foot artillerymen and to musicians. By 1861 fewer regiments had them but were still in use by artillery officers.

Aside from the difference in the metal composition, this sword was not much different than the swords carried by Roman soldiers.



⁴ <https://www.harlemworldmagazine.com/popular-swords-used-in-the-american-civil-war/>