

NEWSLETTER

Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

September 2019

Steve Johnson, Editor

The Russian Fleet in San Francisco Bay, 1863 - Part 2

The summer of 1863 was a time of some anxiety among San Franciscans over the security of their city. They were receiving reports about the Confederate raiders *Alabama* and *Shenandoah* capturing Union merchant ships in the Pacific. They read about a daring raid by Confederates who seized ships in the harbor of Portland, Maine, with the idea of capturing the city itself. Meanwhile, San Francisco was protected by Fort Point and Alcatraz but only intermittently by Navy warships. The revenue cutter *Shubrick* was at times the only armed ship offering additional protection. It was of some relief, then, when the Russian Pacific squadron sailed into San Francisco Bay. First to arrive in October was the *Bogatyr*, the flagship of Rear Admiral Andrei Popov, followed soon after by the steam corvettes *Abrek* and *Gaidamak*, and the steam warship *Kalevala*. It was fortunate they arrived when they did. Five days after the

Kalevala arrived a huge fire broke out in a warehouse filled with rags, on Davis Street. The fire department was hard pressed to put it out, and sailors from the Russian ships came to assist by manning the pumps and using buckets to fill the pumpers. Some sailors were burned or injured, and it is quite possible the six Russian sailors buried at Mare Island were

killed in that fire. The citizens of San Francisco raised money for the injured sailors and the Board of Supervisors sent resolutions to the Russian officers, thanking them for their efforts to save the city; Broderick Engine #1 offered Russian sailors the hospitality of the firehouse.

Dates to Remember

Saturday, Sept. 14, 2019

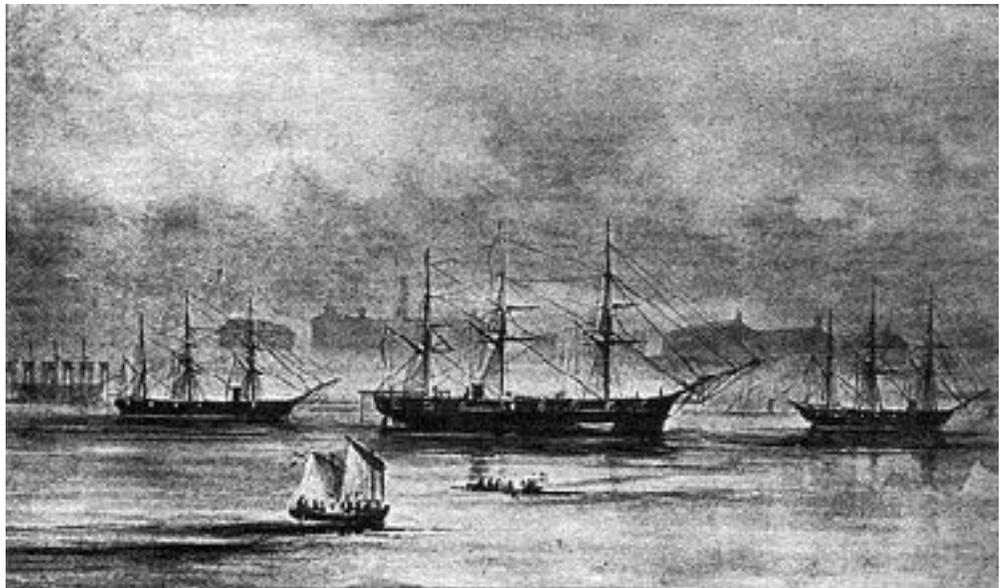
Alcatraz Living History Day and board meeting

Tuesday, Sept. 17, 2019

Peninsula C.W. Roundtable
Lecture TBA

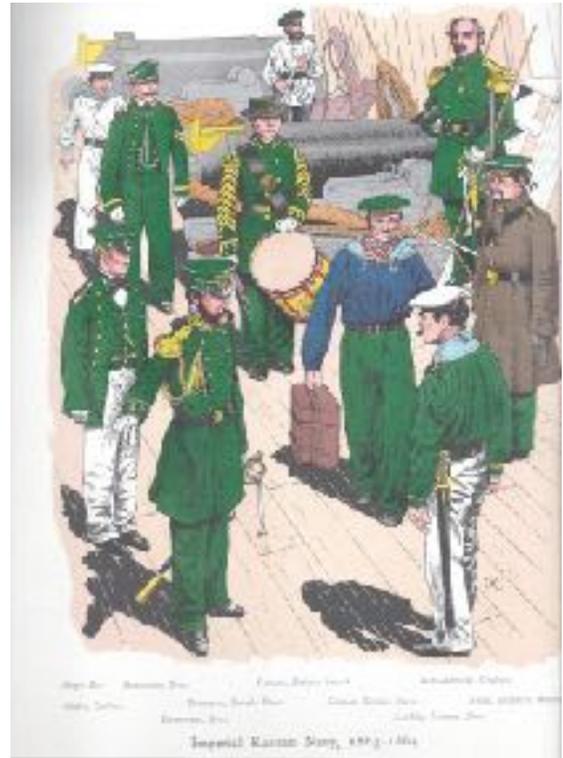
Thursday, Sept. 19, 2019

SF Civil War Roundtable
"The Wit & Wisdom of Lincoln"
by Arnold Kunst, Gold Mirror
Restaurant, 800 Taraval, S.F.
6:30 pm dinner. 7:30 lecture



L-R: Russian ships *Rynda*, *Bogatyr*, and *Kalevala* from *Wikipedia Commons*

During the course of their stay, the Russian sailors enjoyed their visits to the city, and no doubt their presence was welcomed by the saloonkeepers and other city businesses. But the main mission of the Russians was to have their ships repaired at Mare Island naval shipyard, and to support the U.S. Navy if requested. Indeed, if Confederate raiders appeared, Admiral Popov had instructed his officers to clear for action, as they were “bound to assist the authorities of every place where friendship is offered to them.” In November, when the citizens of San Francisco heard that the city of New York had held a huge ball for the visiting Russians sailors, they were determined to have one for their Russian friends as well. The ball was held on November 17 at Union Hall on Howard Street, the largest public hall at the time on the west coast. Hundreds attended, and it included city and military dignitaries as well as the Russian officers and many of the sailors. Forty musicians played dance music, and the champagne flowed freely, thanks to the timely arrival of a French ship loaded with wine. Many toasts were made, celebrating the friendship between the American and Russian people. By spring of 1864 it was apparent that the Russian fleets no longer needed to stay in American ports, and orders were given to leave. Salutes were fired from Alcatraz and Fort Point as the Russian ships departed, leaving behind a memory of when two peoples were friends in peace and war.



Civil War Day at Fort Point



On Saturday, August 17th, Fort Point held its bi-annual living history day. Members of the American and National Civil War Associations filled the fort with about 50 military and civilian re-enactors. Also participating were FOCWA members Constance Smith (cooking demos), Gary Hormel (recruitment table), Steve Johnson (tours and lectures), and Ken Felton. The day was very busy with flag ceremonies,

tours, lectures, and cannon demonstrations. The weather was cloudy but not foggy, and many families attended.

Union Navy Sailor Honored

Also occurring on September 17th was a ceremony held at the Presidio National Cemetery to honor Matthew Arthur, a Union sailor who in 1863 was awarded the Medal of Honor for staying at his post while his ship was being attacked during a ferocious battle. Ken Felton of the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War discovered that Arthur's gravestone did not reflect his award, so he arranged for an honor guard of Union soldiers to fire a rifle salute, near the Medal of Honor plaque placed at Arthur's grave. FOCWA shares the mission to remember the service of those who fought to preserve the Union, and to honor the heroism many showed in the face of battle.



Board Meeting

There will be a meeting of the FOCWA board of directors on September 14th, the same day as the Living History event on Alcatraz. Meeting will take place at 9 am in the library on Alcatraz.

Resources

Friends in Peace and War by C. Douglas Kroll, Potomac Books, Washington D.C., 2007

The full story of the Russian Navy's visit, along with interesting details of what was going on in San Francisco in 1863

"The Russian Fleet in the Civil War" by F.A. Golder in *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 20, No. 4, 1915 which can be accessed through JSTOR

https://www.jstor.org/stable/1835544?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents

JSTOR is a journal that is a gold mine of information for historians

The San Francisco Civil War Roundtable see their Facebook page

<https://www.facebook.com/SanFranciscoCivilWarRoundTable/>

The Peninsula Civil War Roundtable

<http://www.peninsulacivilwarroundtable.org>

